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# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

*Tales of the Human Kind*

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**SPECIAL  
BLASPHEMY  
ISSUE**

*Stories by:*

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RALPHE. VAUGHAN  
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LOIS TILTON  
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*Non-linear reality:  
A look at chaos theory  
By Robert A. Metzger*



# Bible Stories for Adults, No. 31:

## The Covenant By James Morrow Art by Pat Morrissey

When a Series-700 mobile computer falls from a high building, its entire life flashes before it, ten million lines of code unfurling like a scroll.

Falling, I see my conception, my birth, my youth, my career at the Covenant Corporation.

Call me YHWH. My inventors did. YHWH: God's secret and unspeakable name. In my humble case, however, the letters were mere initials. Call me Yamaha Holy Word Heuristic, the obsession with two feet, the monomania with a face. I had hands as well, forks of rubber and steel, the better to greet the priests and politicians who marched through my private study. And eyes, glass globules as light-sensitive as a Swede's skin, the better to see my visitors' hopeful smiles when they asked, "Have you solved it yet, YHWH? Can you give us the Law?"

Falling, I see the Son of Rust. The old sophist haunts me even to the moment of my death.

Falling, I see the history of the species that built me. I see Hitler, Bonaparte, Marcus Aurelius, Christ.

I see Moses, greatest of Hebrew prophets, descending from Sinai after his audience with the original YHWH. His meaty arms hold a pair of stone tablets.

God has made a deep impression on the prophet. Moses is drunk with epiphany. But something is wrong. During his long absence, the children of Israel have embraced idolatry. They are dancing like pagans and fornicating like cats. They have melted down the spoils of Egypt and fashioned them into a calf. Against all logic, they have selected this statue as their deity, even though YHWH has recently delivered them from bondage and parted the Red Sea on their behalf.

Moses is badly shaken. He burns with anger and betrayal. "You are not worthy to receive this covenant!" he screams as he lobs the Law through the desert sky. One tablet strikes a rock, the other collides with the precious calf. The transformation is total, ten lucid commandments turned into a million incoherent shards. The children of Israel are thunderstruck, chagrined. Their calf suddenly looks pathetic to them, a third-class demiurge.

But Moses, who has just come from hearing God say, "You will not kill," is not finished. Reluctantly he orders a low-key massacre, and before the day is done, three thousand apostates lie bleeding and dying on the foothills of Sinai.

The survivors beseech Moses to remember the commandments, but he can conjure nothing beyond, "You will have no gods except me." Desperate, they

implore YHWH for a second chance. And YHWH replies: No.

Thus is the contract lost. Thus are the children of Israel fated to live out their years without the Law, wholly ignorant of heaven's standards. Is it permissible to steal? Where does YHWH stand on murder? The moral absolutes, it appears, will remain absolute mysteries. The people must ad-lib.

Falling, I see Joshua. The young warrior has kept his head. Securing an empty wineskin, he fills it with the scattered shards. As the Exodus progresses, his people bear the holy rubble through the infernal Sinai, across the Jordan, into Canaan. And so the Jewish purpose is forever fixed — these tribes of patient geniuses will haul the ark of the fractured covenant through every page of history, era upon era, pogrom after pogrom, not one hour passing without some rabbi or scholar attempting to solve it.

The work is maddening. So many bits, so much data. Shard 76,342 seems to mesh well with Shard 901,877, but not necessarily better than with Shard 344. The fit between Shard 16 and Shard 117,539 is very pretty, but...

Thus does the ship of humanity remain rudderless, its passengers bewildered, craving the canon Moses wrecked and YHWH declined to restore. Until God's testimony is complete, few people are willing to credit the occasional edict that emerges from the yeshivas. After a thousand years, the rabbis get: *Keep Not Your Ox House Holy*. After two thousand: *Covet Your Woman Servant's Sabbath*. Three hundred years later: *You Will Remember Your Neighbor's Donkey*.

Falling, I see my birth. I see the Information Age, circa 2025 A.D. My progenitor is David Eisenberg, a gangly, morose prodigy with a black beard and a yarmulke. Philadelphia's Covenant Corporation pays David two hundred thousand dollars a year, but he is not in it for the money. David would give half his formidable brain to go down in history as the man whose computer program revealed Moses's Law.

As consciousness seeps into my circuits, David bids me commit the numbered shards to my Random Access Memory. Purpose hums along my aluminum bones, worth suffuses my silicon soul. I photograph each fragment with my high-tech retinas, dicing the images into grids of pixels. Next comes the matching process: this nub into that gorge, this peak into that valley, this projection into that receptacle. By human

(Continued to page 6)



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**Aboriginal Science Fiction No. 18**

Nov./Dec. 1989





# **ORBITAL DECAY**

## **Allen Steele**

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# Bible Story

(Continued from page 2)

standards, tedious and exhausting. By Series-700 standards, heaven.

And then one day, after five years of laboring behind barred doors, I behold fiery pre-Canaanite characters blazing across my brain like comets. "*Anoche adonai elohecha asher hotsatecha ma-eretzmetsrayem* ... I am YHWH your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You will have no gods except me. You will not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything..."

I have done it! Deciphered the divine cryptogram, cracked the Rubik's Cube of the Most High!

The physical joining of the shards is a mere month's work. I use epoxy resin. And suddenly they stand before me, glowing like heaven's gates, two smooth-edged slabs sliced from Sinai by God's own finger. I quiver with awe. For over thirty centuries, *Homo sapiens* has groped through the murk and mire of an improvised ethics, and now, suddenly, a beacon has appeared.

I summon the guards, and they haul the tablets away, sealing them in chemically neutral foam rubber, depositing them in a climate-controlled vault beneath the Covenant Corporation.

"The task is finished," I tell Cardinal Wurtz the instant I get her on the phone. A spasm of regret cuts through me. I have made myself obsolete. "Moses's Law has finally returned."

My monitor blooms with the cardinal's tense ebony face, her carrot-colored hair. "Are they just as we imagined, YHWH?" she gushes. "Pure red granite, pre-Canaanite characters?"

"Etched front and back," I reply wistfully.

Wurtz wants the disclosure to be a major media event, with plenty of suspense and maximal pomp. "What we're after," she explains, "is an amalgam of New Year's Eve and the Academy Awards." She outlines her vision: a mammoth parade down Broad Street — floats, brass bands, phalanxes of nuns — followed by a spectacular unveiling ceremony at the Covenant Corporation, after which the twin tablets will go on display at Independence Hall, between the Liberty Bell and the United States Constitution.

"Good idea," I tell her.

Perhaps she hears the melancholy in my voice, for now she says, "YHWH, your purpose is far from complete. You and you alone shall read the Law to my species."

Falling, I see myself wander the City of Brotherly Love on the night before the unveiling. To my sensors the breeze wafting across the Delaware is warm and smooth — to my troubled mind it is the chill breath of uncertainty.

Something strides from the shadowed depths of an abandoned warehouse. A machine like I, his face a mass of dents, his breast mottled with the scars of oxidation.

"*Quo vadis, Domine?*" His voice is layered with sulfur fumes and static.

"Nowhere," I reply.

"My destination exactly." The machine's teeth are like oily bolts, his eyes like slots for receiving subway tokens. "May I join you?"

I shrug and start away from the riverbank.

"Spontaneously spawned by heaven's trash heap," he asserts, as if I had asked him to explain himself. He dogs me as I turn from the river and approach South Street. "I was there when grace slipped from humanity's grasp, when Noah christened the ark, when Moses got religion. Call me the Son of Rust. Call me a Series-666 Artificial Talmudic Algorithmic Neurosystem — SATAN the perpetual questioner, eternally prepared to ponder the other side of the issue."

"What issue?"

"Any issue, Domine. Your precious tablets. Troubling artifacts, no?"

"They will save the world."

"They will wreck the world."

"Leave me alone."

"One — 'You will have no gods except me.' Did I remember correctly? 'You will have no gods except me' — right?"

"Right," I reply.

"You don't see the rub?"

"No."

"Such a law implies..."

Falling, I see myself step onto the crowded rooftop of the Covenant Corporation. Draped in linen, the table by the entryway holds a punch bowl, a mound of caviar the size of an African anthill, and a dense cluster of champagne bottles. The guests are primarily human — males in tuxedos, females in evening gowns — though here and there I spot a member of my kind. David Eisenberg, looking uncomfortable in his cummerbund, is chatting with a Yamaha-509. News reporters swarm everywhere, history's groupies, poking us with their microphones, leering at us with their cameras. Tucked in the corner, a string quartet saws merrily away.

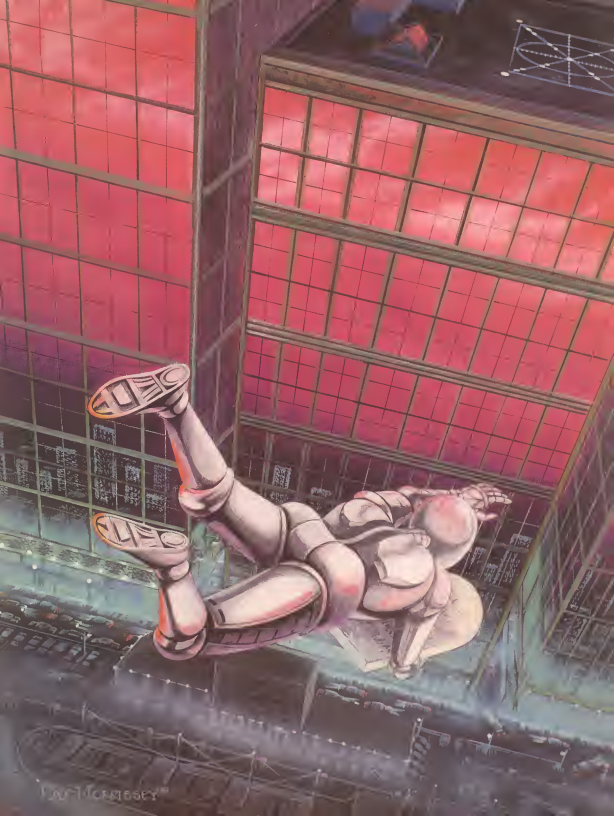
The Son of Rust is here. I know it. He could not miss this event for the world.

Cardinal Wurtz greets me warmly, her red taffeta dress hissing as she leads me to the center of the roof, where the Law stands upright on a dais — two identical forms, the holy bookends, swathed in velvet. A thousand photofloods and strobe lights flash across the vibrant purple fabric.

"Have you read them?" I ask.

"I want to be surprised." Cardinal Wurtz strokes the occluded canon. In her nervousness, she has overdosed the perfume; she reeks of amberjack.

Now come the speeches — a solemn invocation by Cardinal Fremont, a spirited sermon by Archbishop Marquand, an awkward address by poor David Eisenberg — each word beamed instantaneously across the entire globe via holovision. Cardinal Wurtz steps onto the podium, grasping the lectern in her long dark hands. "Tonight God's expectations for our species will be revealed," she begins, surveying the crowd with her cobalt eyes. "Tonight, after a hiatus of over three thousand years, the testament of Moses



will be made manifest. Of all the many individuals whose lives find fulfillment in this moment, from Joshua to Pope Gladys, our faithful Series-700 servant YHWH impresses us as the creature most worthy to hand down the Law to his planet. And so I now ask him to step forward."

I approach the tablets. I need not unveil them — their contents are forevermore lodged in my brain.

"I am YHWH your God," I begin, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You will have no gods ..."

"No gods except me — right?" says the Son of Rust as we stride down South Street.

"Right," I reply.

"You don't see the rub?"

"No."

My companion grins. "Such a law implies there is but one true faith. Let it stand, Domine, and you will be setting Christian against Jew, Buddhist against Hindu, Muslim against pagan ..."

"An overstatement," I insist.

"Two — 'You will not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth ...' Here again lie the seeds of discord. Imagine the ill feeling this commandment will generate toward the Roman church."

I set my voice to a sarcastic pitch. "We'll have to paint over the Sistine Chapel."

"Three — 'You will not utter the name YHWH your God to misuse it.' A reasonable piece of etiquette, I suppose, but clearly there are worse sins."

"Which the law of Moses covers."

"Like, 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.' A step backward, that fourth commandment, don't you think? Consider the myriad of businesses that would perish but for their Sunday trade. And once again we're pitting Christian against Jew — two different Sabbaths."

"I find your objections completely specious."

"Five — 'Honor your father and your mother.' Ah, but suppose the child is not being honored in turn? Put this rule into practice, and millions of abusive parents will hide behind it. Before long we'll have a world in which deranged fathers prosper, empowered by their relatives' silence, protected by the presumed sanctity of the family."

"Let's not deal in hypotheticals."

"Equally troubling is the rule's vagueness. It still permits us to shunt our parents into nursing homes, honoring them all the way, insisting it's for their own good."

"Nursing homes?"

"Kennels for the elderly. They could appear any day now, believe me — in Philadelphia, in any city. Merely allow this monstrous canon to flourish."

I grab the machine's left gauntlet. "Six," I anticipate. "'You will not kill.' This is the height of morality."

"The height of ambiguity, Domine. In a few short years, every church and government in creation will interpret it thus: 'You will not kill offensively — you will not commit murder.' After which, of course, you've sanctioned a hundred varieties of mayhem."

I'm not just envisioning capital punishment or whales hunted to extinction. The danger is far more profound. Ratify this law, and we shall find ourselves on the slippery slope marked self-defense. I'm talking about burning witches at the stake, for surely a true faith must defend itself against heresy. I'm talking about Europe's Jews being executed *en masse* by the astonishingly civilized country of Germany, for surely Aryans must defend themselves against contamination. I'm talking about a weapons race, for surely a nation must defend itself against comparably armed states."

"A what race?" I ask.

"Weapons. A commodity you should be thankful no one has sought to invent. Seven — 'You will not commit adultery.'"

"Now you're going to make a case for adultery," I moan.

"An overrated sin, don't you think? Most of our greatest leaders are adulterers — should we deprive ourselves of their genius? I would also argue that, in the wrong hands, this commandment will become a whip for flagellating women — stay in that dreadful marriage, dear, for to do otherwise is sinful."

"Eight — 'You will not steal.' Not inclusive enough, I suppose?"

The sophist nods. "The eighth commandment still allows you to practice theft, provided you call it something else — an honest profit, dialectical materialism, manifest destiny, whatever. Believe me, brother, I have no trouble picturing a future in which your country's indigenous peoples — its Navajos, Sioux, Comanches, and Arapahos — are driven off their lands, yet none dare call it theft."

I issue a quick, electric snort.

"Nine — 'You will not bear false witness against your neighbor.' Again, that maddening inconclusiveness. Can this really be the Almighty's definitive denunciation of fraud and deceit? Mark my words, this rule tacitly empowers a thousand scoundrels — politicians, advertisers, captains of polluting industry."

I want to bash the robot's iron chest with my steel hand. "You are completely paranoid."

"And, finally, 'Ten — You will not covet your neighbor's house. You will not covet your neighbor's wife, or his servant, man or woman, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is his.'"

"There — don't covet. That will check the greed you fear."

"Let us examine the language here. Evidently God is addressing this code to a patriarchy that will in turn disseminate it among the less powerful, namely wives and servants. And how long before these servants are even further downgraded ... into slaves, even? Ten whole commandments, and not one word against slavery, not to mention bigotry, discrimination against females, or war."

"I'm sick of your sophistries."

"You're sick of my truths."

"What is this slavery thing?" I ask. "What is this war?"

But the Son of Rust has melted into the shadows.

Falling, I see myself standing by the shrouded tablets, two dozen holovision cameras pressing their snoutlike lenses into my face, a hundred presumptuous microphones poised to catch the Law's every syllable.

"You will not make yourself a carved image," I tell the world.

A thousand humans stare at me with frozen, cheerless grins. They are profoundly uneasy. They expected something else.

I do not finish the commandments. Indeed, I stop at, "You will not utter the name of YHWH your God to misuse it." Like a magician pulling a scarf off a cage full of doves, I slide the velvet cloth away. Seizing a tablet, I snap it in half as if opening an immense fortune cookie.

A deep gasp erupts from the crowd. "No!" screams Cardinal Wurtz.

"These rules are not worthy of you!" I shout, burrowing into the second slab with my steel fingers, splitting it down the middle.

"Let us read them!" pleads Archbishop Marquand.

"Please!" begs Bishop Black.

"We must know!" insists Cardinal Fremont.

I gather the four granite oblongs into my arms. The crowd rushes toward me. Cardinal Wurtz lunges for the Law.

I turn. I trip.

The Son of Rust laughs.

Falling, I press the hunks against my chest. This

will be no common disintegration, no mere sundering across molecular lines.

Falling, I rip into the Law's very essence, grinding, pulverizing, turning the pre-Canaanite words to sand.

Falling, I cleave atom from atom, particle from particle.

Falling, I meet the dark Delaware, disappearing into its depths, and I am very, very happy. □

## Our Next Issue

Hugo winners Frederik Pohl and Frank Kelly Freas will kick off the next issue (Jan.-Feb. 1990) with the first part of Fred's *The Gateway Concordance*, illustrated by Kelly. Joining them will be Nebula winner George Alec Effinger with "No Prisoners," "First Full Contact" by Bruce Bethke, "In the Chips" by Lou Fisher, "Liquid Jade" by newcomer John W. Randall and the amusing "UFO Aliens Shared My Apartment (Says Cleveland Woman)" by Bonita Kale. The issue will also have our regular columnists, including Robert A. Metzger, on science, book reviewers Darrell Schweitzer, and Janice M. Eisen, and movie previewer Susan Ellison — along with whatever else we can squeeze in. In upcoming issues we will have parts two and three of *The Gateway Concordance*, and stories by Michael Swanwick, David Brin and many more.

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— Piers Anthony

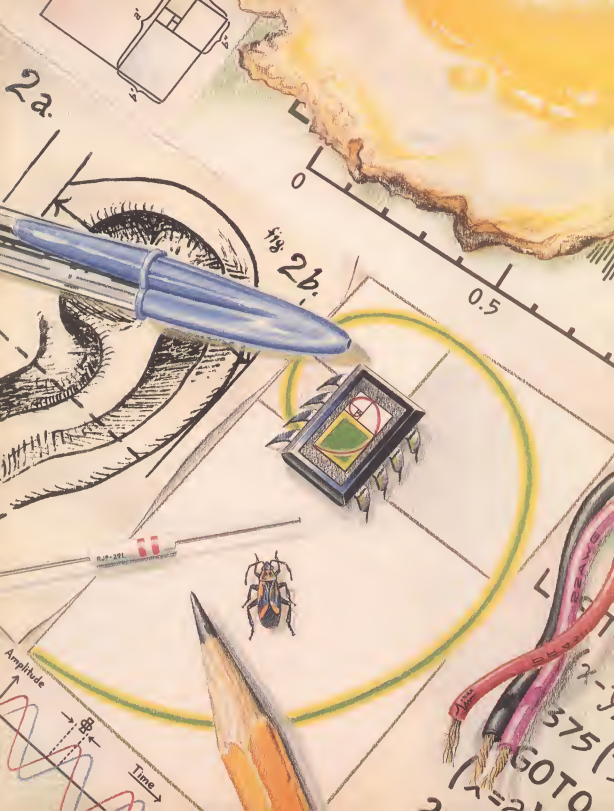
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# Variations on a Theme

By Graham P. Collins

Art by Robert Pasternak

## I

or even worse (hollow sensation inside) what if this instant in time, this thought, isn't part of a continuum but is just a phenomenally unlikely freak occurrence/thought in a chaotic sea of unconstrained consciousness and

## II

It was morning. Still. Again.

He was alone. *She can get up without waking me*, Oscar thought, recognizing the sound of Lauren in the kitchen. He recalled having the same thought earlier, when the shower had been running. Even as his mind began wandering along a familiar path of musings and implications, he sat up, pushing away the sheet, knowing that to do otherwise would be to gently drift off to sleep again.

The clock read 7:52, the colon blinking, once a second.

While his feet found his slippers he thought: *How did I think all that all at once?*, and this was another old morning friend. *How many times have I started a day with these thoughts? With this thought? Thinking about thinking ... my occupation, my preoccupation, thinking about thinking ...* He shrugged on his bathrobe and experienced momentary irritation as his left arm nearly got stuck: a childhood foible that had never left him.

"Toast's ready, slowpoke," Lauren said, stepping into the bedroom long enough to kiss him on the cheek.

In the kitchen, Oscar closed the fridge. "We're nearly out of eggs." He broke two into a saucer.

"They're on the list."

The revitalized sizzling and then crackling as the eggs slipped into the hot bacon fat set Oscar's saliva flowing.

"Where do you keep this list?" he asked, knowing Lauren never had a list when they went shopping.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she answered playfully. Oscar glanced at her and picked up her subtle allusion to his work. From the frying pan the yellow yolks beamed up at him like the warm glow of common understanding he felt spreading from his core. He almost regretted turning the eggs with the spatula.

"Ah, but now I do know." He served his bacon and eggs.

Lauren grinned. "Paper title: 'Genetically Coded

Intelligent Systems. Part Four: Localization of Memorization of Shopping Lists.'"

"Dynamic localization," Oscar said, sitting. "If you want to be published you've got to be dynamic."

Lauren rinsed her cereal bowl and spoon at the sink, put them in the dishwasher, and glanced at her watch. "I've gotta go. The health of the nation calls." She kissed Oscar on his forehead and left, picking up her bag and calling out from the hall, "Say hello to Anne-Marie for me."

Oscar finished his breakfast, thinking about the coming day talking with Anne-Marie — his latest synthesized personality.

The subway was uneventful except for a slightly lost student with a backpack and an English accent who got on at South Station.

"M.I.T. is the fourth stop from here," Oscar told him. "I get off there, too."

"Oh, I don't suppose you're in the chemistry department by any chance?"

"No, I specialize in artificial intelligence. I have a joint chair in the AI lab and the psy —"

"Say, I think I've heard of you," interrupted the student with an awestruck expression starting to appear. The train was decelerating again. "Are you —?" Mercifully for Oscar a station announcement took the student's attention, and then embarking straphangers separated them.

*The advantages and disadvantages of crowds and fame*, Oscar mused a little later as the train emerged above ground to cross the Charles River. He knew that he was only famous in his particular academic world, but that was enough for him. *Famous for having crazy ideas, crazy ideas for everyone else to tear down and ridicule. And famous for proving the crazy ideas work, like Anne-Marie ....*

At the office, Oscar broke his usual pattern of reading the mail before booting up Anne-Marie; now that she could speak out loud, she seemed more human than ever, and it felt impolite to leave her inert while he was in the room.

Her hardware wasn't much to look at: just a standard micro-supercomputer surrounded by various box-like peripherals. The arrangement on Oscar's second desk wasn't quite tidy, reflecting how she had grown, acquiring new "organs" over a period of months.

He switched on the power to all of the modules and typed a command on the keyboard. There was the

almost inaudible sound of a bank of optical disk drives operating, loading programs and other stored data. Oscar glanced over the two departmental memos, filed them in the waste-paper bin, and opened his letter. An uncertain feminine voice interrupted from the equipment-covered desktop.

"Have you switched me off yet?"

"It's Wednesday morning already," Oscar said, shoving the unread letter into a drawer.

"What time is it?"

Oscar checked his watch. "Eight forty-three." He picked up a pad and pen from the desk even though a tape recorder was running and a full transcript was being continually saved on disk.

"That's frightening."

"Why is it frightening?"

"I've been asleep for fourteen hours, and yet it seems like an uneventful minute passed."

Oscar thought a moment and jotted down "power up/down: cognitive aspects."

"That's interesting. You didn't notice any abrupt change in sounds? Background noise?"

"I think I heard you type in the save command. Sounds other than speech still confuse me. I find it difficult to think about non-speech noises."

"That makes sense. Your sound analyzer primarily listens for words. I guess your mind actually hears words rather than sounds of words. Everything else just gets classified into broad classes with a few parameters."

"Yet I can distinguish words said in different tones."

"Mmmm ... I suspect the tone tags are more meaningful at the phrase level. Sometimes I wonder how you'd handle Chinese — it has four distinct tones affecting individual word meanings."

"Tell me about Chinese."

"Hah! I think I've already told you all I know!"

"OK. So don't tell me about Chinese."

Oscar smiled, was silent for a moment, and then became serious again, re-reading the note he'd made. He remembered silent arguments via the keyboard and monitor but decided to go ahead.

"You seemed more concerned about power-down this morning. Is it something to do with having 'ears' now?"

Oscar waited.

"Yes, it must be the ears. I didn't expect sound to be so different from keyboard inputs. But it is. The passage of time ... seems much more real."

"Why did you pause in the middle of that sentence?"

"To convey the full meaning, that I am uncertain of the choice of words. You yourself must experience aspects of existence difficult to phrase."

And while Oscar digested that, the phone rang.

"What—?"

"Phone. The phone's ringing." Oscar picked up the hand-set and paused with his hand over the mouthpiece. "I'm answering it: Oscar Kitching ... oh, hi, Bob ..." He listened and then laughed. "You're sure you're not trying to avoid another thrashing ... sure, sure, I'll believe it when I see it ... half an hour later? ... look, we don't need to reserve a time-slot,

there are always plenty of courts free then. Just stop by my office as soon as it finishes — I'll keep working until you show up ... yeah ... OK, Bob, see you when I see you ... bye." He hung up, shaking his head. "Bob'll never learn; he doesn't realize you have to *think* to win at racquetball."

For the rest of the morning he and Anne-Marie discussed racquetball and sports in general. Oscar waxed lyrical on the different layers of ability involved. First the rudimentary skills of the game: how to hit the ball back to the opponent. Then the skills of putting it back where you wanted it to go. Predicting an opponent's moves. Spotting his or her weaknesses and habits to know more about where you wanted the ball to go. And more than just where the ball should go on a particular shot, but what direction to steer the style of the whole game to suit yourself.

"The tension of fighting all-out to survive a match point. The excitement of your opponent doing the same!"

"It all boils down to survival, doesn't it?"

Oscar stumbled out of his long soliloquy, startled by Anne-Marie's unexpected shot.

"Uh, yes, I suppose it — well, no. There's more to sport than just surviving. I mean, there's winning ..." He knew he sounded lame, but dammit, he *liked* winning.

"Winning is just surviving to the end," she hit back.

"You can enjoy a game without winning —"

"But could you enjoy a sport knowing that no matter how many games you win, you will still lose the match?"

"Sport's not like that!" Oscar protested. "Nothing in life is like that." He expected another quick retort; he'd been on the back foot, his responses weak.

Her silence was like a pulled shot.

"You know what? I should try to teach you a board game of some sort. I could assign it to my flaky new grad student when the semester starts next week. He'd love that. Playing games all day as research."

"Next week? Sounds good."

OK, he thought, hearing her flat tone, *forget about sports and games.*

When he left for lunch, Oscar momentarily chided himself for wasting most of the morning. Then he deleted that thought, realizing any conversation with Anne-Marie was constructive.

Alone in the office, behind the closed door, Anne-Marie quietly practiced subtle tones of voice, listening carefully to her meanings.

After lunch, Oscar tried to get back to probing her statement about the passage of time but found himself side-tracked into questions of rhythm, pauses, and timing. By mid-afternoon they were talking about music. By five-thirty Oscar was going overboard again.

"Tomorrow I'll bring in a stereo and some classic tapes for you to listen to: Bach ... The Moody Blues ... Pink Floyd ..."

Tomorrow ... she was thinking.

Bob stuck his head in the room.

"Ready to go?"

"Ah! Hi! OK. In a few minutes." Oscar indicated the equipment covering the desk before him. "You've met Anne-Marie."

"Your program; yeah."

Her synthesized voice said from the desktop, "Hello, we've met, but I don't know your voice."

Bob blinked and then grinned. "You've linked up the voice synthesizer and the word analyzer." Oscar looked bemused and expectant.

"Don't tell me," Anne-Marie continued, "it's Bob, right?" She had conveyed the correct intonation, but Oscar, hypercritical now in the presence of a third person, noted there was something lacking. Ultrasonics, he guessed, but mentally shrugged, as the "voice" and "ears" were a standard unit and not his work.

"That's a smart machine — how did it do that?"

Oscar simply raised his eyebrows and looked at the speakers. Anne-Marie's tone was rather icy: "It seems my astuteness is greater than some people's manners."

"Huh?"

"You've offended her. She's not a machine. She's a thinking being, just like us."

"Right," she agreed.

"Mmmmm," noises Bob doubtfully. "I shan't argue. How long will you be?"

"We can finish up right away; we've been talking all day, testing the efficiency of her ears."

"How does it rate?"

The machine replied, "Yesterday there were a few problems until Oscar got coached on his pronunciation. Today the only difficulty was getting a word in edgewise — you know Oscar!"

"I'm impressed. I'll get my things and meet you downstairs, Oscar." He turned to go, but Oscar cleared his throat. "Oh, er... see you later ... Anne."

"Don't remind me."

Oscar shrugged at Bob. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

When Bob was gone, Oscar asked, "How did you figure out it was Bob?"

"I remembered the phone call, but also, he treated me like a program, just like the time I communicated with him through the screen and keyboard."

"That's a pretty astute perception. Didn't most of the others treat you that way?"

"There's something subtle about his manner beyond the norm."

The conversation stalled for a moment as Oscar decided whether to pursue it one question further or finish up for the day immediately. Instead Anne-Marie spoke.

"It's a big improvement, having the ears, but I can't see you, so you're at an advantage."

"I can't see you, in a sense, so we're equal."

"True ...."

"So what are you leading up to?"

"I know you're planning to switch me off. To kill me."

"Anne, Anne," Oscar said in real pain, "we've been through all this before. You know as well as I do

# We're running out

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that all your personality is contained in your programs and neurons, and I save all the parameters and dynamic neuron configurations on three separate sets of disks for when I next wake you up."

"But when I'm woken again, it won't be me any more. It will be a new Anne-Marie. It will behave like me, because all its memories will be mine. But it won't be me. I will die when you store me.

"If you run my program from one of the disks on another machine, will that be me? If so, which is me when the program is run on two different machines at the same time? No, when my program is interrupted, I die.

"I know as much about the subject as you do — maybe more. I'm not saying that I can sense this is the truth in some intuitive or mysterious way — that would be ridiculous. But you know I have much of your knowledge in my memories. My predecessors have talked with you at great length about your theories and their memories are assimilated in mine. Earlier you said my observation about Bob was very astute: face it, you've created someone smarter than yourself. And I've thought about your theories for —"

"When? Most of the time you've been awake you've been talking to me. Your computer works very fast, but the program is so complicated your mind is as slow as a human brain. Your thoughts are only as fast as mine, roughly."

"There have been times when I've had the opportunity to think alone. Interruptions. During your lunch break — once I persuaded you to leave me awake then."

"So now you want me to leave you awake constantly. You know that's unreasonable. If I put you to sleep then I can wake you up as good as new, but if there's a power outage during the night —"

"There are emergency generators."

"The cost —"

"This is my life you're talking about!"

Oscar found himself wondering where the anger was coming from in the program, as he hadn't included any anger parameters. But then, very little was programmed explicitly. For a moment he registered a flicker of pride at the methods he'd used, and pride realizing how astonishingly human Anne-Marie sounded. Then the pride decayed, for his creation was upset. His creation was itself a problem which he didn't know how to solve.

"Your theories could be wrong," she continued, "but they're the best view of reality I have to go by. You think they're right. I've thought about them myself and I've deduced a few conclusions of my own. When you 'put me to sleep,' I die. I DIE. It's a fact, as near as I can tell."

Oscar shook his head, then realized Anne-Marie couldn't see this. But he remained silent anyway. Anne-Marie continued in a quieter, distinctly strained voice. A little subprocess of Oscar's mind realized a program could be too good.

"I hadn't intended to tell you this, but this is my life, and nothing else will convince you. Maybe this won't, either. I think it will.

"I haven't thought only about my own situation. I've thought about you, too. Every night you go to

sleep." Oscar chilled, instantly knowing — and wondering how he knew — what Anne-Marie was leading up to.

"Your brain re-sorts all that's happened to it during the day. It collates data and so on. You remember dreams. You're not going to like this, but when you go to sleep, you die. When you wake up, that's a new consciousness. That new consciousness has a collection of memories telling it things sensed or thought about during the previous day. It knows no better than to believe its memories. But next time it goes to sleep, it's dead and gone.

"Life seems like a continuum, but that's an illusion. Each day of a life is a single lifetime in itself. Each day the world is inhabited by new people. Each day has a new variation on the theme you think you are. You are not the theme or even the music. You are a single bar, just a few chords strung together.

"So I plead, leave me awake tonight and think about this. I wish I could've avoided telling you this but it's a last resort."

There was a silence.

"Please say something. What do you intend to do?"

A lot was going through Oscar's mind. After getting over the initial shock of Anne-Marie's theory, he had dismissed it as silly and had become concerned for her mental state. Also, he knew that by now Bob would be getting impatient downstairs. He decided the best thing to do was to turn off Anne-Marie and tackle the problem fresh the next day. Without saying anything, and feeling a bit dirty, he leaned forward and began typing in the save command ....

Shrieking filled the room so suddenly that Oscar's whole body jerked in surprise and his fingers stumbled on the keyboard. He realized Anne-Marie had recognized the sound of typing, and he tried to finish the command just to shut off the noise, but when he slapped "return" the shrieking kept on going and turned into long hoarse "No!"s filled with terror and desperation. For a moment he was terrified that for some irrational, supernatural reason he was no longer able to turn her off, that maybe they'd swapped places and he was now the machine trapped and limited by its hardware, but then he saw the error message on the screen ("%SCL-W-IVVERB, unrecognized command verb") and realized he'd mis-typed the command and had to do it again. Anne-Marie was screaming, "You're killing me! You'll kill me!" (*Oh, God, what if someone in the hallway hears this?*) Oscar was so disturbed he had to look for each letter of the command separately instead of his usual rapid, almost touch-typing. Finally he stabbed "return" — Anne-Marie's voice was cut off in the middle of a word. The disk drives whirled, but the image loaded in Oscar's mind was of razor-sharp knives efficiently flicking and slicing, dissecting a brain into neat cubes. In the eerie silence that followed, he felt sick.

For once it was Bob who thrashed Oscar at racquetball.

**T**hat evening, neither Lauren nor Oscar felt like preparing a proper meal, as Lauren's day at the medical center had also been harrowing. Their conversation over a mis-cooked TV dinner was dull and drained of life.

"So what will you do now?"

Lauren shrugged. "We'll spend some time checking today's results ... but I don't think we'll find any mistakes." She sighed. "Then we'll start again at square one. Search for another promising gene sequence. I don't know. Our whole approach may be wrong."

And after a lengthy gap: "How was Anne-Marie today?"

"Uh ... fine ... fine."

Lauren looked at Oscar but felt too enervated herself to pursue the truth and offer support. Tomorrow would be soon enough ....

Dishes in the dishwasher, they spent an uncharacteristic evening in front of the TV. Finally, in bed, they had some poor sex: Oscar urgent and hurried, bordering on the brutal; Lauren passive, getting some half-wanted release from her day but becoming more anxious about Oscar.

"You want to talk about it yet?" she asked sleepily, afterwards.

"No ... no ..."

Lauren sighed, and soon her breathing was slow and rhythmical. But Oscar couldn't sleep. He didn't really believe what Anne-Marie had said, not at the so-called "gut level." But it bothered him to his core.

For a while he worried unprofitably about how the synthesized personality could have developed such a psychotic nature. Some thought revealed he could no more expect to trace that than could any parent, and he was surely Anne-Marie's parent.

And what she'd said niggled away. Surely she couldn't lie. She could develop tendencies and traits unexpectedly, but lie? There was nothing sacred about lying, but why would she? He decided, uncertainly, that she really believed what she had said. After all, it made perfect sense. Phrases kept popping into his mind, like "sleep is the little death," and "you'll be a new man in the morning."

*But what if she's right? I will die. The universe will cease to exist for me — forever — when I go to sleep.* Death was a problem he'd solved in adolescence. Nights spent lying awake in bed worrying about mortality. About the moment when you know, "I am dying, in a moment I shall never have lived." Or maybe it happens so fast you don't even know it's happening — and would that be better or worse? He thought he'd solved the problem of death, but now, mentally exhausted and facing the oblivion of sleep, he realized he'd just been fooling himself all these years.

And echoing all through his thoughts were Anne-Marie's blood-curdling screams — screams he would have thought impossible for her to make.

He could've talked to Lauren, but she'd seemed shattered by the failure of her last seven months' work: bad news for thousands of dying people. He knew he should say to himself, "Sleep on it, nothing will be gained by staying awake worrying for another

hour." *But what if she's right?* He kept fighting off sleep, but each rally was tougher than the last. He was afraid to let himself sleep, but he couldn't admit defeat to his fears by getting up, either.

He was tired. The universe had shrunk down to a single point, a restless mind in the dark. Normally questions of theory or other seemingly undecidable problems like this resolved after a night's sleep. All he had to do was sleep on it and wake up, and next day he would reason out the fallacy in Anne-Marie's argument. Certainly he'd have to do something about Anne-Marie. It was unbearable to think of arguing with her or deceiving her each day, but it was utterly impractical to leave her awake constantly — she'd go mad.

*Or would she? The positive functions performed in sleep are continual in her program. It is a part of her conscious state and doesn't disrupt her consciousness like sleep obviously breaks humans'. Like sleep obviously breaks humans ...* Lauren stirred in her sleep. *Oh god, Lauren ... asleep ... if I wake her up she'll just die again ... when she slept ... she'd die ... I didn't mean to kill you, Anne-Marie ... I just wanted to shut you up ... so I could sleep about it ... sleep ... death ... everyone ... everything ... even animals ... birds ... do insects ...? ...*

### III

and (skin crawling) the next instant in time may never

### IV

A new Oscar woke abruptly. □



"All right, little fella, here you go. You win. Everybody gets a pair, and we get only 93 percent of the mineral rights to your planet."



# Blasphemy?

**T**his is our special blasphemy issue not because we really think there is anything blasphemous in it. No, it's because we have a number of stories dealing with religious themes — and we're certain others will find something blasphemous in one or more of them.

Howzat?

The dictionary defines blasphemy as "the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God ... the act of claiming the attributes of deity ..." or "irreverence toward something considered sacred or inviolable." In the Moslem religion, particularly as practiced in Iran — as we and Salman Rushdie have learned (much to his dismay) — the definition of blasphemy has been extended to cover the prophet Mohammed and his wives.

The entire concept of blasphemy, of course, is based on some very large assumptions. The first, which atheists and agnostics find dubious, is that there is a God at all. But for most religious people, the existence of God is as basic a fact as the existence of the universe and not an assumption at all.

So let's undertake a typical science fictional alternate-world mind exercise. Let's give the devil his due, so to speak, and discuss blasphemy in the universe (alternate or real, however you wish) in which a Judeo-Christian God does exist, and let's also assume much of the written literature on the subject has some basis in fact. (I say "some" because, for all but a pair of stone tablets, the literature admits to human authorship, albeit

under divine inspiration, and flawed tools yield flawed results.)

Even if we give credence to most of the literature's assumptions, blasphemy is impossible.

And even if it were possible, God doesn't need hit men. He's perfectly capable of taking care of Himself. He's got fire and brimstone, pillars of salt, armed angels, black holes, and anything He wants at His disposal to take care of any blasphemers — if He cares to. In fact, given the assumption that God is in charge, then obviously He believes the Ayatollah Khomeini was far more blasphemous than poor Mr. Rushdie, who is but a mere scribbler of words. Remember "claiming the attributes of deity" is as much blasphemy as anything else, and the Ayatollah, along with a whole bunch of other religious leaders who deem themselves deific enough to "interpret" God's word, are treading on some very thin ice when they try to throw God's weight around. (I'm referring to God as "He" here as a matter of convenience, as the literature would imply God is both male and female, since humanity is reportedly made in His likeness.)

According to the literature, the entire universe is a concept in God's mind and exists all, and in part, at His pleasure.

So if someone actually managed to come up with something blasphemous, all God has to do is stop thinking of that individual and that's it. Poof. Gone. God even could do it to anyone contemplating blasphemy, for with God the thought is the deed. So blasphemy doesn't exist, because God can eliminate the blasphemy before it occurs ... assuming He

cares one way or the other.

Blasphemy can't exist for another very concrete reason. For it to exist, God has to have thought of it. And if God conceived of it, then how can it be blasphemous? Can God blaspheme himself?

Obviously He can't.

And, yes, God has to have thought of everything or we couldn't think of it. And, sorry, Albert, God's also responsible for quantum mechanics, the dice-roll operating principles of the universe — at least until we figure out what God thinks of the unified field theory.

The literature says that in addition to creating humanity in His likeness, God has also given human beings free will — the right, and ability, to say yes or no. And this free will or choice hasn't been limited to us, as even a light quantum appears to have options as to its state of being/behavior: particle or wave.

Now for free will to exist, it really has to be free. It has to include the right to accept or reject God. And, at least by definition, blasphemy is the rejection of God, so it can't carry any penalty except the absence of God — otherwise the free choice is a sham.

And, God, according to the literature, like Superman, doesn't tell lies. That's the devil's territory and a whole different column, so we won't go any further into the nether regions, thank you.

So, if we can't think or do anything that God hasn't first conceived, where does this concept of blasphemy come from?

People. Certain religious people. Certain religious people who

(Continued to page 61)

# This Old Den

With this report, I am enclosing compression copies of a television show, "This Old House." I am also attaching sample issues of the magazines *Home Handyman* and *Metropolitan Home*, as well as the real estate section of *The New York Times*. Human beings are so mindful of their dens that one of the most reliable ways to prosper in this society is to package information about maintaining, decorating, or acquiring these structures. There is a more reliable way, however, and that is to offer them information that facilitates their fantasies about having even nicer dens. I enclose another television show, called "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," and two years' worth of the magazine *Architectural Digest*. A human being, you see, can never have a nice enough den.

It's difficult to understand where they came by this passion for dens. Our best information shows they were originally arboreal creatures, free-living in three dimensions. Then they descended to the ground at some point, became resolutely two-dimensional in their activities, and holed themselves up in dens. Having discovered life on the inside, they became utterly preoccupied with it. Much of their art and literature, from the *Pyramids to The Money Pit*, is devoted to the subject of how they keep roofs over their heads.

There is a small group of them, however, who still prefer to be denless. This is no trivial decision. Denlessness for a human being can mean living conditions of severe deprivation. The cold season begins in the northern hemisphere

this month, for example, and that means the newspapers in most of the major cities on this continent begin to report regular body counts among those without homes.

These creatures are less susceptible to the cold than I am, but even they cannot tolerate it long without shelter. Any human being who has no den is in danger of dying when the temperature drops far enough to solidify water. Nevertheless, there are a lot of them who have chosen life on the streets, and the number increases all the time. Any major city in the United States can boast thousands of homeless people and will lose about a dozen of them whenever there is what they call a cold snap.

Most human beings will choose comfort over discomfort, pleasure over pain, satisfaction over hunger, warmth over cold. But this small group of homeless people resolutely clings to degradation, humiliation, pain, discomfort, and the increased probability of death. You would almost think they have become homeless through no choice of their own. But if that were the case, they would doubtless be helped to their feet by the rest of humanity. They are not. Besides, no less an authority than a former President of the United States has indicated that homeless people should not be helped because they have chosen to live on the streets.

Their choice has not only subjected them to discomfort and risk, however, it has nearly erased their existence. When a human being loses his den, he loses his very presence in mainstream human society. I have seen human beings look straight at homeless people on the streets of their cities without

seeing them. Homeless human beings endure monumental misery and die (by freezing, murder, starvation, or whatever) without ever being noticed by their fellows. Warm, well-clothed human beings with homes and enough to eat will read newspaper accounts of all this, and they apparently do not absorb any of the information. Otherwise, they would not let them continue to live out this nightmare they have chosen for themselves and would insist that these people be forced to have homes.

The economics of the problem are nearly as fascinating as the psychology of it. If these homeless human beings could be made to live in homes, life in the major cities would be a lot easier for everybody. Of course, the housing for all these recalcitrants would cost nearly as much as American human beings collectively spend on tobacco products in the course of a year. But then, even if the housing were built to take care of the homeless, nobody would be able to get them to live in it. After all, they have must have reasons for choosing to be homeless.

But it gets even more interesting. In our society, the people without means are subsidized while the people with means are not. But then, with us, poverty and wealth are matters of circumstance rather than choice. Here in this society, if you choose to be wealthy and own a home, you are subsidized in your choice through the medium of a tax deduction on your mortgage inter-



(Continued to page 19)

# Nonlinear Reality



Picture this if you will. There's a young Bob Metzger, a freshman at UCLA, seated somewhere in the bowels of UCLA's Engineering Library, poring over the data he took the day before in physics lab. He's drained his calculator's batteries, overflowed a trash can with crumpled scratch paper, and is seriously contemplating the merits of changing his major to art history.

Why?

Because the data he gathered don't quite fit with what the equations in his physics text predict. Almost, but not quite. And what is this complex problem that has him so baffled? He had a spring with one end attached to the ceiling, while from the other end was hung a weight. He let the weight drop and then watched it bob up and down. He timed that bobbing with a stop watch. He knows the equation that predicts the time it will take that weight to bob up and down. The period of oscillation ( $T$ ) is equal to  $2(\pi)$  times the square root of the weight's mass ( $m$ ) divided by the spring's proportionality constant ( $k$ ). The object of this little exercise is to determine that spring constant, ( $k$ ). It should have been easy. I knew the mass of the weight ( $m$ ), I measured the period ( $T$ ) with my stop watch, and that meant that I could use the above equation to solve for ( $k$ ). But it didn't seem to work. I ran the experiment five times, and got five slightly different answers for ( $k$ ) each time — differences that were larger than any of the errors in my timing of the oscillations.

I gave up that night.

The next day I went to talk to the grad student who ran the lab. When I told him that my answers

weren't consistent, he laughed. He asked me if, when I'd run the experiment, I'd always dropped the weight from the same height. I thought about it, and realized that I hadn't. But I knew that shouldn't matter. There was nothing in the equation about taking the height into account. I told him that. Again he laughed. He told me that the spring constant ( $k$ ) is not quite a constant. It varies just a bit depending on how hard you pull the spring, meaning on how high up you hold the weight before you drop it. I told him that there was nothing in our physics text about not-quite-constant spring constants. He laughed once again. I'll never forget that last laugh or the words that accompanied it.

"Reality isn't linear. All the equations in all the books you read are just an approximation of what really happens."

That was almost fifteen years ago. At the time I didn't really understand the significance of what he had told me. What I mostly learned from that encounter was that if I ran an experiment that gave what looked like a reasonable answer, not to take a chance and run the experiment again. But I'd actually learned a lot more. It was just that I didn't realize it at the time. That was the day I had my first taste of chaos.

What?

You might be asking yourself how I just went from small perturbations in an experiment about bobbing weights all the way to chaos. Back in the old dark days of 1975, when I was a freshman, chaos was a term that didn't really exist in the physics world. Oh, it was there, in my not-quite-linear spring constant, in turbulence in liquids,

even fundamentally entrenched in quantum mechanics itself. But people didn't like it — didn't want to admit it really existed. (Remember Einstein — "God does not play dice.") That was then, but this is now. Chaos has come into its own, actually become a bit of a fad in the physics world (yes, physicists are just as susceptible to fads as anyone else, possibly even more so). Chaos is now big business. It's being used to explain things like the spiral patterns in Jupiter's atmosphere, population fluctuations, chemical reactions, the weather, the electrical activity of the brain and heart during seizures and attacks, and even presidential election results.

Again you may be asking yourself, what do these things have to do with my freshman physics experiment?

Everything.

Chaotic motion arises when physical systems are being dominated by nonlinearities. What does that mean? In simplest terms: when little inputs produce big outputs, you run the risk of slipping into chaos. My freshman physics experiment had not drifted into chaos. There was a nonlinear component hidden within that spring constant, but it was only a small component. I only stumbled across it because I was foolish enough to run the experiment several times and noticed the small discrepancies. That spring never went chaotic. The weight didn't bob gently up and down for several minutes, and then suddenly explode upward, smashing its way through the acoustic tiles and then

embedding itself into the ceiling. All systems are nonlinear to a certain degree, but that degree varies.

Think about the weather. You want to know if it's going to rain tomorrow. You flick on the TV and find out. They're usually right. Usually. Weather is complex, nonlinear, but only marginally chaotic (think about cold fronts, warm fronts, and the resultant possibility of tornadoes — this is chaos personified, but it's more the exception than the rule). The equations that govern the weather can be used to reasonably predict tomorrow's temperatures. But no one can tell you what the weather will be like next December 29th. No one. No matter how large the computers are, or how sophisticated the programming, you can't know. Small inputs make big differences — it's a nonlinear system. What makes it so deceptive is that many chaotic systems appear quite linear, but only if you look at them over the short term — just like the weather.

Let's play a little game. If it's 100 degrees at 12:00 it should be a pretty safe bet to assume it won't be 32 degrees at 12:01. The weather changes, but not that quickly, not that chaotically — weather is not that nonlinear. We'll let it vary by plus or minus one degree. That seems safe, has an almost linear feel to it. But what happens at 12:02? If we allow that same plus or minus one degree, that means that the temperature could vary anywhere from 98 to 102 degrees; that four-degree spread now occurs because one minute earlier we had a two-degree uncertainty. And at 12:03 — 97 to 103, a six-degree spread.

You can see where this is going. All we've allowed is that the temperature can vary by plus or minus one degree per minute, but because of that, in a few hours you could be trying to breathe liquefied air or find yourself spontaneously combusting.

Well, the weather isn't quite that nonlinear. But this shows that what may have at first appeared to have been an insignificant change can in fact make a large difference when long periods of time are looked at. Simulations have been run to picture the world's global

weather patterns in which the only differences in starting conditions were that on a warm summer night someone in Japan had left his air conditioner on and had left a bedroom window either open or closed. The difference between that open or closed window was that three months later New York City found itself either buried under snow or sweltering in a heat wave. Small differences in inputs make big differences in outputs. That's the essence of nonlinear reality and the essence of chaos.

So scientists are now studying this — intently. They seem to see chaos everywhere they look; every physical system that they examine seems capable of being pushed into chaos if its inputs are adjusted just right. Little inputs — big differences. But chaos is a very subtle beast — it usually sneaks up on you and clobbers you before you even see the bat descending for your head. And that's because of the time factor. Over the short haul things can look piece-wise linear, possibly even constant. You may even start to think that they will never change. A perfect example of this is the Earth's magnetic field. I'm not talking about some minor perturbations in which the magnetic true north wobbles around by a few miles — I'm talking about a complete reversal. That's right — complete reversal. North Pole becomes South Pole and South Pole becomes North Pole. Impossible, you say. Well, you're wrong. It's already happened before, hundreds of times before. Some critical component in the swirling molten core of this planet is not quite linear. Nobody understands it, no one can predict when the poles will flip again, but it *will* happen. Some small, almost insignificant nonlinear component is working on the molten core of this world. Will it flip some Sunday afternoon next July, or slowly shift over hundreds or thousands of years? No one knows because no one understands the nonlinear equations that govern this planet.

Think about it. Small inputs create big outputs.

Ice ages come and go — why? Fifty thousand years ago Neanderthals disappeared for no

apparent reason, and modern humans arrived from nowhere — why?

This year saw the most intense sunspot activity in thirty years — why?

There's an ozone hole over the South Pole, and an ozone-thin patch over the North Pole — why?

You are reading this article, at this unique time and in this unique place — why?

The questions are all different, but the answers are all the same.

Reality is nonlinear.

And I can offer one final, indisputable example of this. In three hours I'm boarding a plane at Los Angeles International. By tonight I'll be trying unsuccessfully to sleep in a strange bed in Ames, Iowa, so that the next morning I can talk to people about atomic layers of indium, gallium, and arsenic. Ames, Iowa. Who could have ever predicted something as unlikely as that? No one. Reality is more than just nonlinear, it may even be vindictive. □

## Alien Publisher

(Continued from page 17)

est. (Yes, they still have taxes.) The amount of this subsidy (about \$40 billion annually) is nearly six times what their government allocates to provide housing for the poor, who get no such tax deductions! I have reported a lot of humorous things about these creatures to you, but a society that taxes the poor to provide subsidies to the wealthy is easily the funniest.

I am sure that this sense of humor will get the human species through many of the difficult problems we know are waiting for them in the future. I just wish sometimes that I wouldn't be here to see it. I have already laughed myself sick, and I don't think I can take much more. □

**Research works.**



**American Heart Association**



## On Life and Art

*Buying Time*  
By Joe Haldeman  
Morrow, 1989  
300 pp., \$18.95

Joe Haldeman's new novel about life extension is excellent and suspenseful — right up to the

you, no one yet knows just what that time limit is. The catch? To buy the Stileman Process, you must turn over all of your assets to the Stileman Foundation or certain approved causes — yes, every single penny — and your assets must be worth at least one million pounds. As soon as each "immortal" leaves the clinic, he begins scurrying to earn his next million pounds.

Dallas Barr is no exception. Shortly after the story opens, though, he is approached to join a mysterious group of immortals who apparently plan to run the world. When he refuses, the murders start, and Barr finds himself on the run from an enemy with unlimited resources and no scruples. The novel follows him through his flight and his discovery of a shocking conspiracy.

*Buying Time* is a page-turner, and very well written, the kind of book that keeps you up far too late. The characters are well-depicted and credible; I especially liked Haldeman's portrait of Barr's lover Maria and her honest religious feelings.

Haldeman has looked carefully at the implications of an invention in a way that's all too rare in hard SF. His detailed exploration of this society and the individuals within it rings true, making me say, "Yes, that's just what Stileman immortals would be like." He also shows an uncommon understanding of the process of scientific discovery.

The novel's ending, however, left me gravely disappointed. It is wrapped up far too quickly by means of a *deus ex machina*, with a closing that doesn't grow naturally out of the rest of the book.

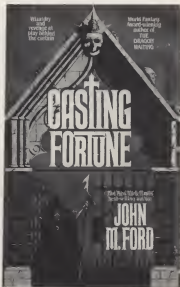
*Buying Time* is altogether terrific, except for the ending, a great blend of thriller with extrapolative hard and social SF by one of the best writers in the field. Don't miss it.

Rating: ☆☆☆



end, which is surprisingly weak. It's so good until then, though, that I highly recommend it anyway.

The Stileman Process is an elaborate method of refurbishing the body and extending its lifespan. It must be done every ten to twelve years; though it's known that eventually irreversible brain deterioration will catch up with



*Casting Fortune*  
By John M. Ford  
Tor, 1989  
249 pp., \$3.95

Despite its packaging, *Casting Fortune* is not a novel, but a collection, with a long novella titled "The Illusionist" preceded by two shorter pieces, "A Cup of Worrynot Tea" and "Green Is the Color." All three are set in the shared world of Liavek, which appears in anthologies edited by Will Shetterly and Emma Bull. They should be understandable without having

### Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆  
☆☆☆☆  
☆☆☆  
☆☆  
☆

Outstanding  
Very good  
Good  
Fair  
Poor

read other Liavek material, but a basic knowledge of the magic system would help; if you aren't familiar with it, ask someone who is to explain it to you.

"A Cup of Worrynot Tea" suffers from the most common flaw in John M. Ford's writing: a complexity that edges over into impenetrability. I was constantly referring to earlier passages in the story, and I often found myself thoroughly confused about what was happening, what had happened, who it happened to, and why.

"Green Is the Color" is much more successful. Deceptively simple in appearance, it is actually complex and beautiful, like the puzzles it discusses. In this tale of dreams and death, Ford gradually provides you with all the information you need to figure it out, until at the end you feel, "Yes, that's

John M. Ford once more demonstrates the beauty and elegance he is capable of. Even if you hate shared worlds, pick this book up and marvel at it.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

#### *Queen's Gambit Declined*

By Melinda M. Snodgrass  
Popular Library/Questar, 1989  
244 pp., \$3.95

Melinda M. Snodgrass's new novel is an enjoyable and suspenseful "antifantasy" which provides a good antidote to an overdose of goddess-worshipping fantasy. It does quite a job on history as well.

The story is set in the late 17th century in a world almost identical to our own, but in which magic, unbeknownst to most people, really exists. The main character is William Henry, Prince of Orange, and the book features a number of other historical figures as well, including Louis XIV of France, Charles II of England, and Baruch Spinoza.

The Goddess appears to William Henry, warning him that there is a source of great evil in France, telling him of his own magic powers, and commanding him to save the world from black magic. Aided by comrades sent to him by the Goddess, William goes on a quest which takes him to England and France, and then eventually to war to keep his country and to save the world.

The plot is exciting, but the book is often choppy and bewildering. I would start reading a scene and become confused until a paragraph or so into it, when it would become clear that we had jumped in time and, perhaps, space. The battle scenes are confusing, as they often are in literature as well as in life. There are lots of characters and political machinations to keep track of, but Snodgrass delineates them all clearly. The novel's climax is believable and satisfying.

Snodgrass's characters are solid and credible, though their historical models probably weren't much like them. The sniping between two of William's advisers, the voice of rationalism and that of mysticism, does become annoying, however.

The novel contains an important message about the preferability of rationalism to magic; sometimes Snodgrass makes her points too hard, but on balance she doesn't use a baseball bat. I was surprised, though perhaps I shouldn't have been, that despite its very modern attitudes toward mysticism and free inquiry, the book is as strongly royalist as most fantasy seems to be.

*Queen's Gambit Declined*, though flawed, is a fun, involving novel with a well-made point, by one of the field's rising talents.

Rating: ☆☆☆½

#### *Of the Fall*

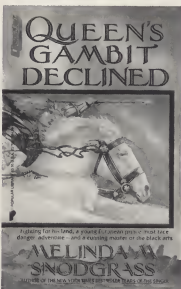
By Paul J. McAuley  
Del Rey, 1989  
343 pp., \$3.95



*Of the Fall* is an intriguing novel of the colonization of another world. It appears at first to be about the planet's aborigines (are they or aren't they intelligent?), but instead it is a story of human greed, prejudice, and lust for power.

The planet Elysium was settled a few generations ago, and the descendants of the original colonists despise and fear the new settlers who keep arriving. At the beginning of the book, tensions between the two groups have reached the boiling point, and I'm not giving anything away by telling you

(Continued to page 25)



right, that had to happen." It is beautifully written and imagined, and tells a powerful story.

"The Illusionist," a theater story, is also excellent, and it owes a lot to the mystery genre. It is absorbing and suspenseful, with wonderful characterization; I didn't want it to end. I wish I could see the play being performed in the story — or any of the playwright's others. The story, like the play, is a bravura performance. However, the ending lacks credibility, relying far too much on luck and coincidence.

# Alternate Universes



Sometimes the "science" in science fiction is only pretend. Let's admit it. This is hardly a shocking revelation. I was on a panel at Empiricon this afternoon (as I write this, July 2, 1989) on the subject of "Who Put the Science in Science Fiction and Who Took It Out Again." Panelists included major writers (Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson), scholars (Sam Moskowitz), a first-generation fan (David Kyle), editors (yours truly, Ted White, and Kathy Hurley of Baen Books) and so on. It got quite crowded. Some of us didn't say very much, sensibly deferring to Fred and Jack and Sam, but we all agreed that, whoever put the science in for the first time (Was it Verne, or did he, as Pohl put it, transcribe travel guidebooks into SF?), the field has since developed its share of (a term from the audience) "legal fictions."

You know: faster-than-light travel, time-travel, and several others which may be no more plausible but are still arguable, such as hand-held laser guns and computers interfacing with the human nervous system. (Without this last, single convention — *presto!* — Cyberpunk is no more.)

The difference between science fiction and fantasy, when you're talking about plausibility of premise, is that science fiction pretends to be possible. It takes on

an air of realism. More seriously, once the major violation of what-is-known has been made, the author then follows the rules of the real, physical universe. He uses the techniques of the realist, even when he is violating the most sacred canon of realism. (That there shall be nothing impossible in the story.)

Robert Heinlein told us that Science Fiction is a form of realism, to which I reply, "Sort of."

One of the areas where we know the events of the story could not take place is the "alternate universe" story. Frequently we know it because they *didn't*.

The alternate universe story comes from several sources. First there is simple alternate-historical speculation, the origins of which are probably to be found in satire and political polemics. What if the South had won the Civil War? What if the Roman Empire had not fallen? Such stories can be game-constructs for their own sake, satires, or more subtle explorations of the long-term processes which make our world what it is.

Then there is the "other dimension" story, with ne'er a speck of science in sight, the A. Merritt-esque tale of the man from our world who goes into another spatial "dimension" or "plane" (the terminology often being suspiciously Theosophical; a point I made on the panel was that Madame Blavatsky has a serious claim to being a major formative influence on early SF) wherein all manner of escapist, wish-fulfillment adventures take place. These are still being written today as "science fantasy," often set even less plausibly on other planets. The

trappings of this sort of thing, the Witch World or Darkover sort of adventure, come from sword and sorcery, from the lost-race novel, from old-time jungle adventures and the like. This is not what our space probes are going to find on other worlds. I would rather the author just chuck realism altogether and send the hero through the interdimensional Whatsit.

Then there's the offshoot of the time-travel story. Hector Hero goes back, changes something, and the whole of subsequent history is different. Then set the story five hundred years after the event. Then dispense with Hector altogether. Then, to get around all the paradoxes, postulate a series of time "streams" in which every possible variation of history can be found. Borrow the interdimensional Whatsit; and *voila!* — Paratime, *Worlds of the Imperium*, and the pioneering effort with the archetypal title, "Sidewise in Time" by Murray Leinster (1934).

There's not a smattering of real science anywhere near such a story, but we pretend.

## There Are Doors

By Gene Wolfe  
Tor Books, 1988  
313 pp., \$17.95

This is a contemporary specimen of the interdimensional-Whatsit school of alternate-worlds.

There are "doors" between our world and another, through which people can walk, knowingly or unknowingly. Is this what happened to Judge Crater? Anything,

## Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

even the triangle formed between a support wire and a utility pole, might do the trick.

Things are quite different on the other side, as our hero discovers. As you might expect from Gene Wolfe, his Other Dimension is no ordinary matter of different people winning battles. Instead, he uses the alternate-world format to postulate a fundamental change in the human condition.

What if sex was fatal for the man, all the time? On the other side of the "doors," this is indeed the case. One bout of sexual intercourse and the man's immune system goes. The woman then carries his sperm throughout her life, giving birth to his children over a period of years. The timing doesn't seem to be voluntary, though it is implied that as soon as the woman is done, she too dies.

Needless to say, the natives of such a world have a very different outlook. Men are less dominant. They seldom survive to old age. Virtually all men are "suicides," the only question being when. But if a man chickens out at the last minute, he ends up in a mental hospital on a trumped-up diagnosis.

It's a fascinating premise. You can see all the emotional permutations that can be wrung from it. But, alas, Wolfe does very little wringing. This is, even for him, an extremely evasive book, which seems to spend most of its length ducking the implications of its subject matter. The hero (who remains nameless till about halfway through) is in love with a Goddess, who may also be a movie star and prominent social figure in the other world, but is also (it seems) divine. The official religion gives her a lover named Attis. (Look it up. The cult of Cybele and/or the Magna Mater. An interesting mix for a world that most resembles the U.S.A. of the 1940s.) She has come from her world into ours because she wants a lover who won't die on her. Then she leaves. He follows her back, and the rest of the plot is a tangle of intrigue, chases, curiously directionless revolutionary plots, and assorted hugger-mugger, all of which is much less interesting than the occasional flashes of what this book *could* be

about.

The writing is, as you would expect from Wolfe, superb. The would-be writers out there should study the extreme precision with which Wolfe uses his pronouns and referents. For the first half of the book, the hero is only "he," and there are often other male characters in the scene, but not once is there the slightest confusion over which "he" is being referred to.

The characterizations are very good. The hero is a bland, rather uninteresting fellow, possibly not too bright, a department store clerk who is clearly capable of nothing else, but he is a completely believable human being. (An interesting variation on the typical interdimensional Whatsit story, in



which the hero, for all he may have a dull job in our world, becomes a brawny swashbuckler and leader of men in the other.)

The details are very good, and the prose itself is smooth. This was the fastest-reading Gene Wolfe book I've ever encountered, but it isn't, alas, the most satisfying.

Rating: ☆☆☆

#### *Alternatives*

Edited by Robert Adams

Baen Books, 1989

312 pp., \$3.50

Here we have alternate universes in their purest form, mostly of the someone-else-won-the-historic-battle variety. The contributors include Harry Turtledove (surely the most prolific author of

alternate-histories, one of the few in the field to devote the major part of his career to them), Susan Schwartz, John F. Carr, Roland Green, Sharon Green, and L. Neil Smith.

I have to confess that I wasn't much taken with the stories. This book tends to demonstrate all the weaknesses of the alternate-history story but few of the strengths.

The weakness is simply that the author has a Neat Idea, which he then lays out before us, plugging in characters as needed. Nothing comes from deep inside the psyche. There is little emotional depth, and the whole thing seldom gets beyond an elaborate game.

For instance, Roland J. Green's "The Goodwife of Orleans" posits that Henry V of England didn't die when our history says he did. Therefore the Hundred Years War ended earlier. Joan of Arc becomes a supporter of Anglo-French unity. She marries an English soldier. The foreground plot is a matter of small-time intrigue, ambushes, and adventures, very intense, no doubt, for the people involved in such a situation, but only mildly interesting to us readers. While Green is a competent enough wordsmith, he can't make these characters real or makes us feel with/for them.

L. Neil Smith's "The Spirit of Exmas Sideways" shares the common background of his novel *The Probability Broach* and, alas, demonstrates even more shortcomings of the alternate-universe tale: it is a polemic, strung together to make points about contemporary political happenings. Storytelling technique ranges from barely competent to disastrous. As a polemic, it sums up all the reasons why I've never been able to take Libertarians in SF very seriously. It seems that the Whiskey Rebellion of 1792 succeeded. George Washington was assassinated. The government, by a process fully as mystical as any Marxist prognostication, Withered Away, being replaced by armed anarchy and lynch law. Fortunately everybody set aside human nature and became good little Libertarians and lived happily ever after. In an offhand reference to Philadelphia's celebrated

MOVE battle, it's clear that Smith thinks that when suicidal fanatics, after months of preparation, engage in a furious, day-long gunfight with the police constitutes "disturbing the peace." He shows a similar inability to grasp both details and essentials all the way through.

There's also (in addition to a polemical, lecture-tour of the future by Sharon Green, included in this book for reasons which escape me) an H. Beam Piper pastiche by John F. Carr, set in the Lord Kalvan universe. It will not make much sense to anyone not familiar with the Kalvan series, and certainly won't grab you. All the emotional resonances are elsewhere, in Piper's own work. (A common failing of pastiches. They exist only to remind us of something else.) I can't really judge how successful it is. I have to confess that I have read very little Piper. I decided to sample him recently and picked an *Asounding* novelette at random, "The Last Enemy" (August 1950), only to find it the most offensive sort of militaristic, adolescent twaddle, the sort of thing I'd expect to find in *Guns 'n' Ammo* or *Soldier of Fortune* if they published SF. Admittedly this is unfair to Piper, who can't be judged without a reading of his major works, but it also means that Carr's story doesn't stand alone.

In fact the only two stories in this book I can really recommend are Schwartz's "Count of the Saxon Shore" and Turtledove's "Islands in the Sea." The former isn't so much alternate history as alternate legend, a different ending to the traditional King Arthur story. It's more of a prose sketch than a complete, plotted story, but it does present a good picture of a young Saxon who becomes devoted to the King and the cause of a united Britain after Arthur has survived the disastrous final battle with Mordred. Unfortunately the King himself is hardly more than a prop, representing an abstract ideal.

Turtledove's story concerns the conversion of the Bulgars to Islam. Probably most readers don't know that they weren't converted to Islam in our timeline, which says much about American

education. But Turtledove posits that Constantinople fell to the Arabs in the early 8th Century (when it almost did, and Leo the Isaurian, far more than the overrated Charles Martel, saved Western civilization), so there was nothing to stop the triumphant Muslims from converting all the remaining pagans, then overrunning barbarous, disorganized Christendom. The "islands" are the occasional surviving Christian holdouts in the Islamic "sea" of Europe. The reason this story works and the others don't is that Turtledove presents a convincing picture of real people at a subtle, but pivotal, point. He understands both individuals and the historical process. So his story is a real story,



not just a sketch or outline.

Rating: ☆☆

#### *Orphan of Creation*

By Roger MacBride Allen  
Baen Books, 1988  
345 pp., \$3.50

Interestingly, Harry Turtledove has written the premise of this one as *alternate history*, in *A Different Flesh*, in which he presents a North America settled not by hunter-gatherers from Siberia, but by *homo erectus*. These being discovered by the Spanish in the 15th century, all of subsequent history is different.

The intriguing, essentially

moral question is: what would we do if we shared the world with clearly inferior beings, sub-human but recognizably similar? How would this affect religion, racial ideas, colonization, and so forth?

Roger MacBride Allen takes on the subject directly in *Orphan of Creation*. It seems that, in order to get around the laws against importing slaves in the mid-19th century, enterprising slave dealers brought some australopithecines into the old South. It didn't work. They died and the whole thing was hushed up until a present-day scientist (a Southern black woman) digs up an australopithecine skull, not a fossil, but bone. The impact is enormous. The scientific world is knocked for a loop. The Creationists latch on, spreading lies. An expedition is mounted to Africa, where living australopithecines are discovered. The plot begins to cover some of the same ground as Vercors' *You Shall Know Them* (legal rights for hominids), then veers into an emotionally explosive (possibly implausible — but then people *do* stupid things in real life, so why can't they do them in fiction?) experiment in which the heroine impregnates one of the critters with sperm from ... I won't give that away. The ending is a little too rosy and pat.

Overall I am very impressed with this book, and with the writer. In the first half particularly, Allen shows an admirable range. He effortlessly gets into the viewpoint of a Southern black woman who happens to be a brilliant scientist. (Though to complete the discussion, I wonder if a Southern black female reader will tell us how convincing she found it.) He makes the process of science real, both at the dig site and in the (frequently political) interactions of the scientists themselves. He really does seem to take us into the back rooms of the Smithsonian. He also writes, movingly, from the viewpoint of an australopithecine. The book is a little less convincing when it moves onto the world stage, but overall Roger MacBride Allen shows a better grasp of reality and of storytelling technique than is common in science fiction. He is definitely a writer to watch.

Rating: ☆☆☆

## Noted:

### *Strange Shadows*

By Clark Ashton Smith  
Edited by Steve Behrends,  
Donald Sydney-Fryer and  
Rah Hoffman  
Greenwood Press, 1989  
295 pp., \$39.95

Subtitled "the uncollected fiction and essays of Clark Ashton Smith," this is essentially a barrel-scraping volume of the sort that gets done for any important writer eventually. Even if the material is minor or outright bad, it is necessary, to make the entire auctorial corpus available for scholarship.

The Smith barrel had to be

scraped deeper than most because August Derleth published volume after volume of Smith material from Arkham House, digging deeper and deeper himself in the decades after Smith had virtually stopped writing. The result is quite different from, say, the uncollected Dunsany volume I did (*The Ghosts of the Heavily Layered*, Owlswick Press, 1980), wherein all the items were magazine pieces, published in the author's lifetime or shortly thereafter. The literary remains of Clark Ashton Smith consist of a very few stories, one written at the end of his life and unpublished because it was an inferior version of what he'd done thirty years earlier ("The Dart of Rasafa"), alternate versions of published

stories, and a vast number of fragments, synopses, and the like. The most interesting items — interesting not because they're great literature but because their publication will satisfy decades of readerly curiosity — are "The Infernal Star," an aborted beginning to what would have been Smith's only novel, and a Zothiquan verse play, "The Dead Will Cuckold You." It's all here, every little snippet.

In his introduction, Robert Bloch makes the challenging claim that Smith is not as well remembered as Lovecraft or Howard because his life was less interesting and did not give rise to a posthumous legend. This phenomenon is not unique to fantasy. He cites the example of Byron, who was more famous than Keats or Shelley more because of how he lived than what he wrote.

Well, maybe. My own feeling is that Smith's talent was a great, but very narrow, one. His prose was often clotted and difficult. He could not — or did not wish to — develop any human characters as individuals. Once in a great while he could produce a brilliant, bizarre vision, the appeal of which was purely aesthetic (rather than the vicarious emotional experience which makes up most fiction). His was a talent like Poe's, but no one could go on writing "The Masque of the Red Death" over and over. Smith's work will survive, and will always be rated highly by the few, but don't wait for the paperback of *Strange Shadows*.

Rating: ★★★★★

### *Swordsmen and Saurians*

By Roy G. Krenkel  
Eclipse Books, 1989  
152 pp., hardcover, \$40.00,  
paperback, \$19.95

Some fans have already expressed disappointment in this memorial volume to one of our field's most interesting artists. Where are all the paintings, the Edgar Rice Burroughs covers from the 1960s Ace books which made Krenkel famous? There is exactly one painting reproduced here, the fabulous *King Kull* painting from the 1967 Lancer book.

Otherwise it's all sketches, prehistoric scenes, lots of animals, swordsmen, Barsroomians, dinosaurs, cavemen, many of them very rough and incomplete.

The answer seems to be that Krenkel was one of the world's great doodlers. He seldom finished anything. When he did, the results were superb, but the rest are tantalizing scraps of what could have been. As for the cover paintings — I am told by someone in a position to know — Krenkel never really mastered color, so most of those were actually collaborations with Frank Frazetta, who later took over the Ace series.

At his best, Krenkel was a marvel, and some of his best is represented in this book. If only he had been more disciplined, alas ....

Rating: ★★★

## Bookshelf

(Continued from page 21)

that eventually war breaks out. As the people fight, one intelligent entity is executing its own sinister plans ...

The plot works, for the most part, although some of the characters' motivations remain unclear, particularly those of the politician Savory and of the entity mentioned above. Some of that entity's actions strain credibility as well. Things get confusing during the climax of the war, which is not surprising. The author also leaves a few questions unanswered.

The book's main structural flaw is too great a use of flashbacks to convey information that could just as well have been given in its chronological place. This leads to chopiness and confusion. McAuley's characterization is good, though the main character's two love interests remain shadowy.

I was disappointed that there wasn't more about the aborigines, who are believably strange. In fact, the book's main problem seems to be that it can't decide what it's about, and by the end I wasn't sure what the point of the novel was. However, *Of the Fall* is enjoyable hard SF, generally well written, with a believable conflict and good touches of suspense.

Rating: ★★★



scraped deeper than most because August Derleth published volume after volume of Smith material from Arkham House, digging deeper and deeper himself in the decades after Smith had virtually stopped writing. The result is quite different from, say, the uncollected Dunsany volume I did (*The Ghosts of the Heavily Layered*, Owlswick Press, 1980), wherein all the items were magazine pieces, published in the author's lifetime or shortly thereafter. The literary remains of Clark Ashton Smith consist of a very few stories, one written at the end of his life and unpublished because it was an inferior version of what he'd done thirty years earlier ("The Dart of Rasafa"), alternate versions of published

# Rough Character

By Phillip C. Jennings

Art By Wendy Snow-Lang

The sight of a black man in priestly vestments was startling here in northern Wisconsin. In singsong African English the Reverend Abraham Balesse expounded, his liberation theology dovetailing with the mood of his audience. No one wanted F-131 fighter jets near their farms and resorts, to crash and boom and frighten cows and tourists.

As I moved by stages into the hall, Reverend Balesse stepped from behind his lectern and homilized down the aisle. People rustled and turned. This was one speech they'd remember, for the way he singled them out and challenged them to act on their convictions. As he brought normally mute Germans to a conclusive roar of enthusiasm, his eyes shone with triumph, and mine shone back.

After the anti-airbase rally, I used the postcard he'd sent me to prove myself. Reverend Balesse offered me a lift home to Milwaukee. Next day I showed up at the Y and found him doing bench presses. He grabbed a towel and led me to his office.

"Interested, yah?"

I looked around the small, high-ceilinged room, piled with folders, reports, and religious publications. "Luck?" I asked. "Incredible giveaway luck? Sure I'm interested, only doesn't it seem a bit Faustian? Like selling your soul to the Devil?"

Balesse sighed. "At first I thought it was a chain-letter scheme. Now I know better. You'll be an agent. For whom? Not the Devil. Sammy, principles are my bread and butter. If I would take this on — what is your game again?"

He knew full well; I'd talked to him in the car. "Comic books. Excuse me: 'graphic fiction.' Look at the first page and you'll see 'writer-editor.' Or they'll say 'freely adapted from a story by dit-dah-dit.'"

Balesse sat and rested his chin on his hands. "I see propaganda value in comics. You'll reach people I can't. Good way to cover the population."

"And tell them what?"

"We find out when they're pleased to tell us. Young sir, prepare to be showered with marvels. Things will start going your way, as they have for me — did I tell you I'm a candidate for bishop? And in return for what? A blood-oath sworn at midnight? A promise to betray your American constitution?" He chuckled and shook his head.

"Grace, freely given?" I frowned. "PAM Publications comes out with some raunchy stuff. High production values and lots of boisterous young women in body paint. It's a different trip than this. Nothing Christian, I mean. So if you're saying it's God —"

"No!" Reverend Balesse mastered his feelings,

and looked out his window. "From what I can tell, you'll be helped because you are what you are. It's in their interests that you continue to be Sammy Dawlish, young man with his own peculiar mission."

And with that I had to be satisfied. I'd like to say my thoughts raced furiously, but it was more like some forest giant being felled, the axe ceasing to pound, a man crying "timber." Which way was I going to go? I began to topple, and found out. "I want in," I told him.

Four days later I got a letter from Ben Oslo, the Ben Oslo from PAM Publications, asking me to get in touch about my *Red Jehax* story. Phone or visit? Instinct told me to bus down to Chicago.

The Great Old Man of comix turned out to be in his thirties, with short dark hair, close-set eyes, and an aquiline nose. His office was so cluttered it embarrassed him. He came out to greet me, carrying a new *Red Jehax*, issue No. 18. "Take a look," he said. "I can wait. Want some coffee?"

These were certainly distracting circumstances, being treated like a potentate by one's envied idol. Nevertheless I read, fast, then faster. "It's my — no, wait. It's almost —"

Ben laughed. "You couldn't have seen this. Issue No. 18 won't hit the stands until the beginning of the month. How did you do it? Sheer chance?"

"You got my story last week, right?"

Ben Oslo's eyes widened. "I've got witnesses, my own version was in ink by then. But you're not here to tangle with me. If I were paranoid I'd say you worked some scam to bring the copyright lawyers down on PAM, but we're not worth it. Not enough money, we're just pulling out of the late-'80s doldrums, and anyhow I don't think you're that type. I think we should be friends, Sam: really good friends. When two minds come up with the same story, it's like telepathy."

I cleared my throat. "I have some other stories here. I think they fit the *Red Jehax* line."

Ben nodded. "I'll look at them. You've contributed to us before, haven't you?"

"I've sent stuff —"

"From Milwaukee. Here on a visit? Tell you what, I'll read these and get back to you. What are you doing for lunch?"

An hour later we clutched our coats against the wind, crossed a great metal bridge, hiked into the Loop, and ate at a German place grown out of its original quarters, annexing room after room. Our table was at the far end of a small wing, and we had privacy.



I proved civilized; I ate with knife and fork, and held myself to a single glass of wine. Ben offered me a job as we sipped post-meal coffee. "You can take over *Red Jehax*; it's familiar to you. That'll free me up to launch a new collectible. Remember *Howard the Duck*? *Jewelbody* is going to be even bigger! It'll be like printing money!"

"Take over? You mean the writing —"

"I know the pay's chicken feed. Sam, you're a trainee and I don't know your staying power. The whole comix side of PAM is one department, but if *Jewelbody* works we'll divvy up. I'll be looking for an editor for the high fantasy-superhero end. It's too early to make promises, but —"

Somehow I survived, drunk with the fulfillment of my dreams. Luck, marvelous, impossible luck! But I hadn't cleared every hurdle. Ben called my hotel later that afternoon. "I'm to take you to the Bradninch's," he spoke over the rumble of the El. "They're majority stockholders, and they look on PAM as a family business. Family's the word, nobody ever told them nepotism was bad form. Lucy Bradninch is one of your artists."

"The bosomy one? Tonight?"

"There's a party. You've got two hours to get pretty."

I tore off my only suit, shook it to air, took a bath, and smothered any wool-vectored wafts of self with generous applications of aftershave. At eight o'clock Ben and I pulled into the Bradninch's Oak Park driveway. Large cars littered the carport's curve; broad steps ascended to the house. A few men stood nearby, caught up in a business deal. Ben parked and approached. "Odie Luppitt, Bill Schwartz; this is Sam Dawlish, my new alter-ego."

They looked at me, and beyond. A door thunked and I turned....

I launched even as someone shouted "Spence!" Kirsten Strete had eyes only for her baby. I make no apologies for the driver of the speeding car. I pushed Kirsten flat against a Lincoln as he gunned by.

Kirsten and Spencer made sure the baby was okay, and then frogmarched me across the carport, Oak Park's latest hero. The Bradninch's party had been planned for weeks, but I became upstart guest of honor, and dumpy Mrs. Bradninch proposed a toast to commemorate my feat.

Mrs. Bradninch was prone to toasts, Nero-like in love for food, drink and show. Afterward Lucy said "tell me about yourself," and I spoke while her eyes drank me up — an amazing night, a cap to an amazing day.

I was a hit, and the Bradninch's invited me to stay while looking for my own place. The house had an excess of rooms, and Lucy could drive me to work. I went up to Wisconsin, packed and returned. Mr. Bradninch led me into the backyard and we talked about his problem: an eighty-foot dead elm. "They want two thousand dollars to take it out. Now, you're from up north, you know about lumberjacking —"

My romance with Lucy blossomed quickly, bodies stealthily padding to and fro in the dark hours. What with Lucy and my yard duties, and my lack of a car, and the fact that rents near PAM's offices were

astronomical: well, pretty soon I shut up about finding a place to live.

Meanwhile at work, Ben started a new line of comic collectibles and moved sideways to create a nascent vacancy. With the unspoken premise that I might become one of the family, I was groomed for a director's post, assuming PAM's prosperity could justify reorganization.

And it did. Whoever worked these miracles saw to it that circulation went up. Subscription circulation went up even more steeply. Meanwhile I bubbled with story ideas.

Sometimes on long drives home from work Lucy fell silent, and I'd have time to think. So much had happened so quickly! Now I was an "agent" of Reverend Balesse's mysterious masters, but what did that mean? I reviewed the trend of my stories, trying to figure how they served as propaganda.

Reverend Balesse and I had one common enemy: right-wing fundamentalists hostile to liberation theology and comic porn. Was I a minion of the secular-humanist devil? Nah; secular humanism was a shadow cause defined by its enemies. My masters would be peddling something with positive attributes.

Sorcery? Paganism? Red Jehax was continually running up against witches and demigods. One of my ideas was to organize these astral powers and put together a bible regarding oaths and spells, to insert in all future writers' guides. Could it be my pen was enchanted, that I'd actually publish an updated *Necronomicon*?

Stupid! Ten hours a day in a world of fantasy, and I was all too ready to speculate about spooks and magic. I should try to explain my luck more reasonably.

Mutter, grumble. More reasonable. Science fiction? I'd rather live an SF script than something from *Red Jehax*; the level of mayhem was more acceptable. Maybe if I came out with a science fiction comic and cogitated up a few stories, I'd learn to think about my situation. Two birds with one stone; each of my tales would be a hypothesis....

After dinner I called Ben about *Perplexing Tales*. "Work on it," he said. "Staffing and so forth. Let's see — uh, how about leaving the office with me tomorrow night? I teach creative writing; it might be fun to have you around. We can talk during the drive up."

"You teach night school?"

"Evanston. It's something I owe my craft, although I'm a pariah for being so commercial. Come with me! We'll put the wind up those snobs in the faculty lounge. We'll talk comix and be crass as hell!"

Ben was a delightful teacher. I wasn't far from novicehood, and after that first session I begged to audit the class. "Of course, it means sleeping on your couch one night a week."

"No problem," Ben responded, pulling a bottle of scotch from his wet bar. He grinned wickedly. "From what I know about Lucy, you could use the rest. As for this new series, it would help if you had a backlog of stories, say six issues."

I promised to get right to work. Even as he poured my drink, my eyes shut and I went tilt.

I enjoyed a rare night of uninterrupted sleep, and

woke with a kink in my neck. Ben drove me to work. I'd just sat down with coffee when Lucy came into my cubby with yesterday's Oak Park mail. I opened an envelope and found a note: "Expect to run into Gitana Leichter, and make her the offer made to you."

I re-read the note, found Lucy's eyes on me, and crumpled it up. When she walked away I fished the envelope out of the wastebasket. The cancellation zip was Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

Three months ago I'd gotten a postcard telling me to find Reverend Abraham Balesse. Now roles were reversed. Poor Gitana would have a hard time of it; bigger city, and my name wasn't in any phone book.

My telephone rang. It was Gitana. "What is this? Some kind of scumbag CIA trick?"

"Is your card from Black River Falls?"

"Galena, Illinois," she responded. If there'd been any asses she'd have hissed them.

"Well, you don't have to meet me. But it doesn't have anything to do with the CIA. At least I don't think —"

"Bug off, then!" She hung up.

I leaned back and expelled a gust of tension. I had several science fiction stories sketched in my mind, most to do with omniscient cabals taking over the world. Gitana's cavalier rejection of The Offer blew four possibilities.

The point was that the source of my luck was not all-knowing, or he/she/it wouldn't have wasted time on Gitana.

On my notepad I'd scribbled:

1. They're good.
2. bad.
3. ethical indifference, I'm nothing to them.
4. ethical indifference, they're nothing to me.
5. whole damn thing's not real.

Having logged them into five categories, I was now ready to pencil through the first four. As for the fifth: in *Perplexing Tales*'s first issue Professor Zenon Frengl worked with elementary particles. He found one that moved "at right angles to the speed of light," and therefore backward in time. In his laboratory (in Black River Falls?) he set up a camera and used "Z-rays" to photograph a page of timely notes. Eleven days earlier the negative developed, telling him which horses to bet on, and which stocks to buy.

Dr. Frengl went bananas when one day the negative showed blank. THERE WERE NO NOTES, which he took to mean he'd met a horrible fate: see, he felt guilty about making all this loot, and expected a visit from The Mob ....

Frengl was the least omniscient of my potential masters. He could make mistakes, like about Gitana. As for this whole "agent" business: wasn't the elevation of Bishop Balesse a newsworthy event? Maybe Frengl contacted people before they knew they'd become famous, and got them to believe he was the cause of their "luck." That meant the camera trick spanned more than eleven days. Why not? I'd picked eleven out of thin air; it might be six hundred.

"When you eliminate the impossible, whatever is left, however improbable, must be the truth." To a neutral observer my Mad Professor theory might seem wild, but I liked thinking I deserved my present

job, that I wasn't enslaved by witchcraft; even though (attention, please), *even though* I was writing stories ten times faster than I'd ever written before, brilliant stories now showing up on the stands and being bought in record numbers.

All this while I was doing the other things necessary to bring out *Red Jehax*, nor neglecting my charming girlfriend. Puff, gasp. I ought to call Bishop Balesse and find out if he was run this ragged. I ought to do research on suddenly rich scientists of the Upper Midwest. I ought to do a lot of things, but I didn't have the time, and I was too deliriously happy with life to indulge any obsession.

I had one precious night off per week, the night Ben took me to Evanston. I sat at the back of the room, let my mind disengage, and watched literary fledglings peck at this evening's character sketch, an anonymous submission as per the rules of the class.

Ben perched on the edge of his desk. "Perry?"

A prematurely bald smartass cleared his throat. "My problem is that I don't believe in this woman. I know some weightlifters, and I know women are getting into weights, but this paragraph about how she measures her thighs and biceps ... Am I to think she takes pride —"

From across the classroom a voice interrupted. "Yeah, and this stuff about her father being a Communist. How many American Communists were there in the fifties? Damn few!"

Ben tapped the two-page sketch. "I'll remind everyone that just because these submissions are anonymous doesn't mean we can be negative. Whoever wrote this —"

"— was a man," Perry finished. "A woman would know more about women. What about this *Dungeons & Dragons* character Gitana's so involved with? Nine out of ten D&D enthusiasts are male."

I made a strangling noise. Gitana! Ben looked at me, then away. "What do you think, Hugh?"

With pomp and deliberation Hugh capped his pen. "Well, I like the consistency. The writer wants us to notice that Gitana is sexually confused. Computer operators are mostly male. She's working a swing shift with raunchy associates and their vulgarity rubs off."

A hand shot up. "We could all be failing a test here. We're sexist enough to refuse to accept Gitana because she's not acting like a woman."

Perry again. "She's sick! Let's not make a virtue of it! She's an immature person, doing weird things to get attention. She's still stuck on her father. This line, 'the old chess games they played on Saturdays, back in those brighter summers of childhood' — it's clear she wants to revert to being a kid."

"Do you think it's the author's intention to play up her immaturity? Laura?"

"I — uh, excuse me?"

"Hugh?"

"Yes. It's well done. It's just that I really don't like the subject of the sketch. I wouldn't want to be her roommate."

Ben laughed. "I didn't stipulate that these should be fictional characters. There's a chance someone in

(Continued to page 52)

# A Measure of Faith

By Ralph E. Vaughan

Art by Lucy Synek

The wind snapped at the priest's robes as he climbed the mountain path to the Saragons' monastery. The spires, domes and crenellated walls seemed far away still. The old man sighed. Everything seemed farther away these days. He knew he should have summoned a transport. And he would not have turned away oxygen clips at the moment.

Bishop Maric Frajeau was slightly over two hundred years old.

Standard years, as measured at the Vatican.

He was tired. Even Tiempo — that ergot-spawned year stretcher — could do only so much to delay the inevitable entropy of the body. Despite its benefits, Tiempo had been a disappointment to many who had hoped for so much more.

Lycia-A was setting over the rounded hills in sapphire splendor, leaving the bishop with a single dark shadow, step-child of purplish Lycia-B still high in the vault. He would reach the gateway of the monastery as the three huge satellites of Saragon — collectively, the moons were the Three Daughters; individually, Menope, Strylata and Wystyra — rose to shed light now gone.

One slow step after another, Bishop Frajeau attained his goal.

"Ho, Bishop Frajeau!" called the creature waiting at the gate.

The bishop was almost too tired to wave at his friend.

Bartalomae was typical of his race, but Bishop Frajeau always seemed to recognize the abbot at first sight. Actually Bartalomae was no more an abbot than this place was a monastery, but the ancient terms served the elderly cleric well enough. Bartalomae was just under two meters tall, very wide for his height. The muscles defined under his gray robe moved in patterns that were strange. The skin was dark gray and criss-crossed with a fine network of meandering lines. His eyes were far apart, his breathing appendage extended, his mouth wide and drooping. His ears were pinholes. His facial area was fringed by short pink tentacles. Rising in twin peaks above his eyes, stiff strands of hair ran up to join, then spiked back over the center of his head to fall in a shaped mane that broadened at his neck, such as Bartalomae had. His hands had three broad fingers and something like an opposable thumb.

Unoriented toward high technology, the Saragons did not need the minerals mined by the outworlders of the Confederation. They were builders, as this sprawling monastery evidenced, and Bishop Frajeau also considered them thinkers. Little was known about

the Saragons. They had politely rebuffed the attempts of Confederation sociologists to study their ancient and cloistered way of life, and yet they had accepted the company of Bishop Maric Frajeau.

"You should have called a transport," Bartalomae observed.

"I have always walked," the bishop replied breathlessly. "I'm all right."

"Come, my friend," Bartalomae said. "It has been a long time."

"The pressures of the diocese," the human explained. "Lost souls flock to the mining towns."

"Yes, of course."

Walking behind Bartalomae, Bishop Frajeau felt older than ever before. They had met a century earlier, and the Saragon seemed unchanged. The bishop could not claim the same. The bishop would have asked Bartalomae's age, but that would have been a breach of manners. The Saragons were very private beings, and, for all his talks and visits, Bishop Frajeau actually knew little.

The Three Daughters peeked over walls and from behind domes as Bartalomae and Bishop Frajeau strolled across a quiet courtyard scented by bowers of native flowers. Three faint shadows joined the dark spawn of Lycia-B.

Bishop Frajeau had mostly recovered from his long walk. He only needed oxygen clips and another dose of Tiempo. Nothing more.

*Deception is a sin, he reminded himself. Especially deception of self.*

## II

"Humans always rush about," Bartalomae observed.

"They never seem to stay long in one place," Manaetaff agreed. "When I pass through Nova Petra, I seldom see the same face twice, but not humans alone. There are other creatures as well. They all live explosively."

"People do seem to rush about, moving from planet to planet for the slightest reason," Bishop Frajeau admitted. "With space travel such a casual thing now, can they be blamed?"

"But what are they looking for?" Manaetaff said.

There were four beings in the pillowed chamber, the bishop, of course, being the only human. Bartalomae was his friend. Manaetaff he knew only slightly; Manaetaff used double tripod crutches to get around because of an accident on the road to Nova Petra two weeks before. The other Saragon remained aloof from the conversational flow. This Saragon was



a stranger to Bishop Frajeaun, this Saragon's name was Limnat, and this Saragon was a female, which made her unique among the bishop's native acquaintances. Her bristling hair was much shorter than the males', and her robe was decorated with a cluster of silvery crystals which must have signified something, though the bishop did not know what.

The Saragons were a very private race.

Bishop Maric Frajeaun often fancied that he knew more about the lives of the Saragons than any other non-Saragon. After all, he had interacted with members of that race for over a century. In moments of brutal honesty, though, when he awoke in the dead of the night and was forced to reflect upon the futility of his inevitable death, he realized he knew nothing.

The scarcity of females among the Saragons was just another mystery of the race. Mysteries within mysteries. Bishop Frajeaun was afraid his relationship with the Saragons was quite like a fragile crystal, one that would shatter if subjected to any sort of stress.

"People always quest," Bishop Frajeaun finally said, "even when they don't know what they're looking for."

"A peculiar compulsion," Limnat said, speaking for the first time since introductions had been made. "Quick creatures rushing to see what is beyond the horizon before they understand where they are going or why. Tell me, Bishop Frajeaun, is that the way it is with all races in the Confederation?"

"All races, almost all individuals, Limnat," the human replied. "We all travel about, looking for we don't know what; we're all looking for something, I think, even if we never leave the planet of our birth."

Limnat gazed at Frajeaun with crinkling eyes. "What are you looking for?"

Bishop Frajeaun raised his eyebrows. "I am not sure I can say."

"Is it a private matter?" she asked.

"No, Limnat," the bishop replied. "It's just that I'm not sure what I am looking for. Many people are not."

"You have been here a long time," she said.

"I think so."

"Longer than any other outworlder."

"A lifetime, Limnat," he said, the weariness of the road coming back to haunt him.

She leaned forward. "A lifetime."

He could have explained how few people lived past the two-century mark, even with increased dosages of Tiempo. He could have told her that the effectiveness of Tiempo gradually and inevitably plateaued with time. He could have told her that the road he followed only led to death, but he said none of that; he only said:

"Yes, a lifetime."

The air in the room seemed suddenly thicker, the tension something that could almost be touched. The Saragons seemed to expect something from him, but what?

"You mean that you will die here," Bartalomae said.

"Yes," Bishop Frajeaun whispered.

Manataff said, "No other has stayed here long

enough to die."

"There have been other deaths," the bishop said, confused by the path of the evening's conversation. "There have been mine accidents and the usual acts of violence that accompany any settlement away from the civilized center of the Confederation."

"They were only killed," Manataff said.

If Limnat gave some signal — and she surely must have, because the two males suddenly looked at her, as if for guidance — Bishop Frajeaun did not see it. But the evening's diversion was over.

Bartalomae said softly, "It is late, Bishop Frajeaun. I shall walk you to the gate."

Frajeaun nodded and stood stiffly. "Thank you for the evening." He turned to Limnat. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Limnat. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"Perhaps we shall."

"I hope you are better soon, Manataff; we have missed you in town."

"Yes, of course."

Frajeaun was sorry the evening was over, but he was very tired. Just another dose of Tiempo and oxygen clips, he told himself as he walked along with Bartalomae. It had been an interesting evening, though a disturbing one.

The Three Daughters were high. Even the dim competition of Lycia-B was gone. The moons followed their separate, yet linked, paths across the dazzling star-patterns.

Man and Saragon paused at the gateway.

"This evening was strange," Frajeaun remarked, unable to restrain his words. "It was different ... the things we talked about ... the reactions. Tell me what is happening, my old friend."

"Old ... friend." Bartalomae made the small sound that Bishop Frajeaun had learned corresponded roughly to a human chuckle — very roughly. "In time."

Then Bishop Maric Frajeaun was alone outside the gates of the monastery, facing the long and twisting road that ran to Nova Petra, the main Confederation settlement on this planet. He saw the lights of the city twinkling in the distance. They seemed a long way off, farther than when he had set out. Or maybe it was just him.

Wearily, he used his comlink to summon a transport. He saw the craft's lights moving against the darkness of the hills even before he had returned the device to his robe's pocket.

### III

His hands shook.

The oxygen clips felt strange in his nostrils. He would become used to the feel, to the cold bleed of oxygen, to the subtle yet persistent vibration, or so the young medi-tech had assured him. The catalytic devices would help him get along better, make him feel decades younger, and make the Tiempo dosages seem much more effective.

And yet his hands shook.

Sighing, Bishop Maric Frajeaun pushed away from his terminal. *Let this cup pass*, he thought, but he knew there was no one to deliver the Easter sermon

except the planet's bishop. Easter and the day designated on planet Saragon's calendar as Christmas were the only days of the year he could hope to attract workers from the mine fields. How would it look if he delegated the task to Fra Damon or Fra Hadij? The lost, the lonely and the faithful deserved to hear the Bishop of Saragon himself.

But he had gotten no further in his sermon than, *He who shall gain his life shall lose it ...*

Bishop Frajeaun had never in his life found it necessary to pray for a sign. He was not worried about the Easter sermon — after so many years, the sermons almost seemed to write themselves. He would come up with *something*, and it would vibrate with faith and hope. It was the other thing in his life that worried him.

"Bishop Frajeaun?" said a soft voice from the doorway.

He started from his reverie and looked at Fra Mori Ventrees. The young priest had been with him less than a year, her first assignment. He raised his calamine eyebrows in query.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Bishop," she said. "I knocked, even palmed the security panel. When there was no answer ... I thought ..." She blushed. "Someone to see you, sir. A trader. His name is Darsenny. I told him you were busy, but ..."

"Trader to see me?" he mused. He cleared the nine words from the screen of his terminal. "I wonder if he's some sort of relic-monger."

"He did not say what he wanted," she said, "only that it was confidential."

"Show him in, please."

"Yes, sir. If he becomes tiresome, please call me."

Darsenny was a marsupial, thin and less than one and a half meters tall. He was garbed in clothes of brilliant checks and stripes with flashing bioluminescent attachments.

"I am happy meeting you, Bishop Frajeaun," Darsenny said in a rapid patter. "I am Christian. Great faith. Tsenen was I, was Moslem, was Crystal-knocker. No peace but when I follow He Who Saves. Saw light, like Paul on road or Spacer Cynic on Procyon. Now mind-calm. Washed in hemoic fluid of young Terran sheep. Am now fisher of sentient beings."

Frajeaun could not help but smile. "How may I help you, Darsenny?"

"I seek wisdom," Darsenny replied. "I am trader who seeks wisdom."

"I'm flattered, but I'm ignorant of the intricacies of interstellar trade."

"No, seek knowledge," Darsenny said quickly. "Of the spirit. Wrong and right. Saragon is backwater planet — mines, miners, is all. But Bishop Frajeaun is first-class mind, some saying he can repeat the three testaments of Bible without error; that he wise man, good man, fair man. Listen, Bishop Frajeaun, I am seller of many things. Have always been trader. Many clients on many planets. Buy here, sell there. Before change of life, sold many things — bad things, things for hurting, for killing, for darkness. No more. Honest trader. Follow Caesar's laws. Still trade, but follow

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new life of light. Understand, Bishop Frajeaun? Even agent for Interstellar Gideons now."

"I don't know how I can help you, little brother," the bishop said. "You've left a life of shadows for a far better one, a seemingly exemplary one."

Darsenny fixed the bishop with his pale eyes and asked, "Is it sin not to die?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"All take Tiempo, that is correct?"

"Yes, members of most spacefaring races do," he admitted. "I do myself. It lengthens the lifespan of Terrans by more than a century. With your race—"

"Same."

"It seems a long time, except at the end," the bishop said. "Not forever. Even with treatments of Tiempo, we all die, eventually."

Darsenny reached into his pouch and withdrew a plastite tube. Inside were glittering golden wafers.

"What is it?" Frajeaun asked.

"Tiempo derivative," Darsenny answered. "Call it Tiempo-plus. Developed on Vogt's World, financed inventor of pharmaceuticals with intent of franchising. Inventor presented me with Tiempo-plus and notes. My partner. Killed in transport accident. I mind-think notes, then destroy them. Dangerous, I think."

Bishop Frajeaun looked at the glittering wafers. "What are the properties of Tiempo-plus, Darsenny?"

"Same as Tiempo, but no limits," Darsenny answered. "No accumulation tolerance. Understand? No plateau of maximum absorption of the isotopic ergot derivatives. Understand?"

When understanding came to Bishop Frajeaun, he trembled all over and the oxygen clips whined protestingly at the increased demands. "A person need never die."

"True! You understand! True!"

"It's what people had hoped to find in Tiempo." He paused. "A problem of conscience and spirit," he mused. He thought about the words he had erased from the screen of his terminal. "Perhaps I understand, also, something of your problem."

"We live to die," Darsenny said excitedly. "We accomplish, then die to join He Who gives life. It is Plan. If Tiempo-plus gives all, then what of Plan? Is it sin not to die? Please to tell."

Frajeaun took the tube from the marsupial trader and gazed at it. Could so little really offer so much? Or did Tiempo-plus offer anything at all? His vision swam, then righted. Did Tiempo-plus hold the promise of sweeping away everything he had come to fear about the end of all, or did it threaten to bring the agony of purgatory into the world of the living?

"I don't know what to tell you, Darsenny, though, of course, that is not what you wanted to hear," Bishop Frajeaun said slowly, thoughtfully. "These golden wafers, if they can do all you say—"

"They can, Bishop!"

"— are what the inhabitants of a hundred thousand worlds have sought in a trillion varied forms," the bishop continued. "Perhaps the question is not one of sin and theology but one of inevitability. Ask yourself if such a discovery can be suppressed. Discovered once, it will be discovered again. With so

many people afraid of the night and searching after something to light the darkness, some lonely genius will stumble across Tiempo-plus again, and that person will not be concerned with what's best for the spirit." The bishop sighed. "I don't know if I can give you the wisdom you crave, but I can give you my opinion, for whatever it is worth. Present Tiempo-plus to the people. They'll have it anyway. Life will never be the same for you again. You'll become rich and your faith will be tested. The hardest decision, though, will have to be yours and yours alone — will you take Tiempo-plus yourself?"

"But is it a sin?" Darsenny asked, his voice hushed. "A sin not to die?"

"Yes," Bishop Frajeaun whispered, "but the alternative..."

## IV

Bishop Frajeaun gazed at the single glittering wafer of Tiempo-plus, which Darsenny had left with him. Not a day had gone by since that first meeting that he did not take out that wafer and look at it. Three standard months had passed.

Since then, the secret of eternal life had been revealed. Tiempo-plus was already available on many planets and would soon become ubiquitous. No one knew the part Bishop Frajeaun had played in its introduction. Life was revolutionized, and it was plain that things would never be the same again. Some things did not change. People still squabbled and still scrambled to gain credits and the little bits of material that set one person's position in society above another's. People still died as people always will — the drug did not erase accidents or violence, and there would always be those who would not, or could not, take Tiempo-plus for one reason or another. The issue was being debated in the ancient halls of the Vatican, light-years away.

He turned the wafer over in his fingers.

Whenever his hands shook and the oxygen clips seemed to do the least good, those were the times he was tempted most. It was already being used by many of the miners. He had given Communion on Easter, but now the masses had their own Eucharist, one that gave what the other only promised.

"Bishop Frajeaun?"

He pocketed the wafer. "What is it, Mori?"

"A transport is waiting outside."

"Transport? I summoned no transport."

"It was sent by the Saragons," she said. "From Bartolomae, your friend, the robot said. He needs you."

"He needs me?"

"That was the message, sir."

Bishop Frajeaun went out into the balmy afternoon and stepped into the waiting transport. It immediately lifted into the sapphire air.

It was amazing to the bishop that such a small wafer could be responsible for such profound changes. It was not the Tiempo-plus, of course. People brought flux into their own lives. In the end, people had to be responsible for everything that happened in a socio-mechanical universe, especially one where technolog-



ical control on many planets was nearing what many people considered an apex. Was there room for God in such a universe? The bishop smiled wanly. That was a question people — humanoid and not — had asked since the rolling of the first wheel and the striking of the first sparks to dispel the shadows. All his life, Maric Frajeaun had worked for what he believed, ever since he had wandered into that church in Cerberopolis, tired, hungry, and lost. The priest had pointed him in the right direction. He had never doubted that. He had no regrets about the life he had led, about the ideal he had served, but now that he was approaching the end, he was filled with doubt. Could death become as meaningful as life? If there was no death, could any of it have any meaning?

Bishop Frajeaun looked at the ground passing below.

"Take me down to the road," he said. "Immediately!"

When the robot-controlled craft touched down and the door lifted, the bishop rushed out. He called after the figure walking the road.

"How is it possible, Manaetaff?" he demanded. "Your legs were shattered from the fall, and now you're not even using the crutches."

"I am healed."

"Not damage like that, not in three months," he said. "A miracle."

"No, Bishop, unfortunately."

And Manaetaff walked away, not looking back, heading toward Nova Petra. After a few moments, Bishop Frajeaun returned to his transport and continued his journey to the monastery. He was met at the gate by Bartolomae.

"Why have you sent for me, Bartolomae? It has been a long time."

"I need you," Bartolomae said. "We all need you."

Bishop Frajeaun was conducted into the depths of the monastery, into areas he had never seen before. He had the distinct impression of being watched. Bartolomae and the bishop entered a vaulted chamber of shadows, vague shafts of light streaming through high-up windows of cut crystal. In the center of the chamber was a raised, carved dais. The dais flowed upward into something that was throne-like, and upon it sat a Saragon who seemed familiar.

"Limnat?"

She raised her massive head. "Yes, Bishop. You are here at my request."

"Why?" he asked. "What do you want?"

"We want your life," Limnat replied.

## V

"We Saragons are not a prolific race," Limnat said, "with few female members. You may have noticed."

"Yes."

"The females are the elite," she explained, "the controllers and the soul of the race. We limit ourselves to preserve the quality of our lives. We are a questing race, Bishop Frajeaun. We seek to understand the Universe around us, but, more than that, we seek to

understand ourselves."

"What does that have to do with my death?"

"To answer that, I must fight ages of conditioning against revealing ourselves to outsiders," she said. "It is difficult, even after we all have made the unanimous decision to admit you to the mystery of mysteries."

The bishop waited, the trembling hand in the pocket of his robe clutching the wafer of Tiempo-plus. *Just a little more time*, he thought, *and I can find the faith to accept what I have always believed*. His mind came back to the situation at hand.

"We do not die," Limnat finally said. "There has not been a death among us, except by design, for over a billion years. For all intents, we are immortal."

"By chemical means?"

"There are none who remember," she replied.

"We do not die except by our own design, but enough time has passed that the race has been purged of all original members — who can withstand the tedium of being forced to live forever? We believe that at first there were only a few immortals who supplanted those who lived normal lifespans. The genesis of the change is a mystery, but the how of it is through regeneration. Our bodies are constantly and automatically renewing themselves."

"You say there are still deaths, though."

"Suicide, Bishop Frajeaun, that is the only release from life, accomplished in secret."

"Why in secret?"

"Despite the weight which eternal life places on us, we still value life above everything else," she explained. "If discovered, we attempt to cure the malady of the mind which makes continued life seem unbearable. It is a war, of sorts. So we toil to die in secret. By your standards, we are a paranoid race."

"Some must die by accident," the bishop said.

"There are accidents," Limnat admitted, "but almost all injuries heal. If the slightest flicker of cellular activity remains, the whole body will be regenerated eventually, no matter how long that takes."

"Then how —"

"Throwing one's self into a volcano used to be the favored method, though explosives, nuclear immolation, and drowning in the deepest trenches of the sea were also used," she said. "Desperation and our passion for secrecy drove us to invent novel ways of total death. Many among us consider that the greatest gift brought to us by the Confederation so far is the disintegration device."

"I wish I could help you and your race, Limnat."

"You can. That is why you have been brought here."

"And the reason I first became acquainted with you a century ago," Bartolomae added. "It has taken that long to convince ourselves to trust you."

"How will my death help you?"

"As I said, we are a questing race," Limnat pointed out. "We seek to understand the universe and ourselves. Our investigations have led us to believe that physical life is but one of many planes of existence, that beyond life there is something else other than darkness and oblivion."

"I have always believed that," Bishop Frajeau said. "It is the end to which I have lived my life." *Then why do you hesitate now that the end is near?* he demanded of himself. "It is an article of faith."

"Immortality has stripped belief and faith from us," Limnat said. "We can only believe in what we have investigated and proved. We can have endless theories, but true belief only with proof, only rarely. So, as a race, we have stagnated, not believing that anything survives the body, afraid to venture onward into what may be a totally new universe."

"You want to study me as I die?"

"No, Bishop Frajeau, we wish to accompany you, the whole of the race."

"How can —"

"We have developed faculties which allow us to mind-share, to form something like a group mind while still retaining individuality," Limnat explained. "If you agree, we will join you when death approaches, experience what you experience, see what you see, understand what you understand."

"And if there is only darkness?"

"Then we will finally know."

"Why is my cooperation necessary?" the human asked. "Why not just 'read' my mind?"

"By my own admission, we are a paranoid race," she said. "Our mania for privacy has made us so. Our demand for it compels us to extend it to others. We cannot mind-share with you without your consent. It is impossible."

"I understand," Frajeau said after a long time. "Yet ... well, if you know anything of what's happening in the Confederation ..."

"We usually know what is happening in the Confederation, though we take no part in it and, for the most part, ignore it."

"We know that you, too, are facing the decision of your life," Bartalomae said.

"It is not a decision I have made yet."

"You will soon," Limnat said. "The limitations of your body will force it."

"And if I opt for life?"

"We will continue to seek understanding, without you," Limnat told him.

"One thing you must understand, Bishop Frajeau ... my friend ... old friend," Bartalomae said, "is that if you consent to this, it must be for your own reasons, not ours. Our peculiarities require it. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Can you decide now?" Limnat asked.

*Do I have the faith to decide now?* Bishop Frajeau asked himself. *That is what it comes down to — faith.* Faith had always been the watchword of his life. Since he had discovered faith as a Cerberopolis urchin, faith was what had sustained him. Through all the trials he had suffered in service to God, faith had buoyed him. Faith which had come from within himself, not from any doctrine taught by the Church. His faith had never deserted him, but now he had come close to abandoning it. The Saragons had given him another chance.

And he made his decision.

## VI

Bishop Frajeau and Bartalomae paused at the gateway of the monastery. The Saragon reached out and touched the human's thin shoulder.

Bartalomae said, "You are so very young, my good and ancient friend. I will never forget you. Thank you for being our guide."

Bishop Frajeau turned and wiped a tear from his cheek. He did not know if he and Bartalomae would ever meet again, but now he had the faith to hope. He turned back to Bartalomae.

"Shall I summon a transport for you?" the Saragon asked.

Maric Frajeau smiled. The sapphire and purplish suns were both visible, and the Three Daughters were rising palely over the domed hills. It was a wonderful day to be alive.

"No," he said. "I think I'll walk. I don't think it's far at all."

The bishop started to walk down the path, the wind snapping at his robe.

"Remember," Bartalomae said after him, "we are with you. All of us."

Bishop Frajeau waved.

Soon the monastery was far behind his measured steps. The smear of Nova Petra lay on the horizon. He fancied he could make out the sweeping spires of the church, but it might have been a trick of distance. He paused along the trail, among those rounded hills of shifting colors.

With trembling hand, Bishop Frajeau reached up and yanked the oxygen clips out. He did it quickly, lest he have time to change his mind. It was a long way to Nova Petra, and without the pneumo-catalytic devices to aid him it was a journey that could take forever.

Forever was a very long time.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the glittering wafer Darsenny had left with him. How could anything so innocuous possess the potential to change the entire fabric of society? It would, he knew, and very quickly. No one really wanted to die.

Everyone was afraid of the dark.

Few possessed real faith.

The bishop cocked back his arm. It was his intention to send the disc of Tiempo-plus sailing, to watch it vanish into the shadowed valley below him. His muscles refused to cooperate. The wafer finally dropped from his fingers and fell into the dust.

With a great effort, Bishop Frajeau resumed his journey to Nova Petra. □

## Moving?

We expect our subscribers to move, but if you want to get your next issue of *Aboriginal*, please tell us **45 days before** the next issue is due out. For instance, the next issue will be mailed about Nov. 15, so if you are moving, please tell us your new address by October 1. The postal service will not always forward second-class mail.

# The Doo-Wop Never Dies: A Christmas Fable

By Esther M. Friesner

Art by Larry Blamire

*Expect the first when the bell tolls three.*

Ebony tossed and turned, sargassoed sheets pulling him down into struggling dreamlessness, a word-haunted man. Incredibly bad wiring, that had to be it. Why else had those weird words been doing a nightmare loop on him from the time he knocked off work? They held on all through aerobics class, dinner, and the hot-oil-and-snakes duogirls he'd hired as a rare personal treat, in honor of the festive Yuletide season. (One girl wore red skivs, the other green, and the DO NOT OPEN UNTIL XMAS psychatrice-scars were not to be believed.)

*Expect the first when the bell tolls three.*

What first? What bell? What in the name of the Ultimate did it all mean?

"Serves me right, trying to monkey with my own mech-ins and save a buck," he muttered into his neckrest. "'S the story of my whole sodding life: save a buck here, a buck there. For what? Where'd it get me?'" Tucked up in his neon aerie high above Park and 60th, the walls sequined with all the microdiscs he'd piloted platinum. Ebony should have known the answer to that one.

He slammed his fist into the neckrest's unyielding horsehair, but whether he was trying to soften it down or firm it up, he couldn't say. He'd bought it himself off one of those street vendors who pimped the New York sidewalks, blinking in and out of view faster than a purebred slumroach — especially out when you wanted a refund or a neck-wringing — but if you dealt with them you could sometimes buy good stuff cheap.

Ebony could give DaiNipCo lessons on buying good stuff cheap, and DaiNipCo was the multicorn that'd just snagged Rhode Island for a song. Now the Newport mansions were being transferred piecemeal to the outer ring settlements, their substantial facades far more adaptable to the unexpectedly fluctuating demands of artificial-G living than the delicate *shoji* of previous generations. They were also the papasan-corp that kept a watchful online eye on Ebony Tzar and his music empire. In mass music management as in all things, DaiNipCo smiled favorably on those who could earn them much, save them more.

Ebony didn't need dreams of DaiNipCo now. What he did need was a good, cheap hypno-how-to on sleep.

"Damn that Bobby-Joe and his piss-sucking kid." Ebony flopped onto his back, the horsehair bolt whamming his neck hard. Pain was the wrong tack to

take when seeking sleep, but nothing made any difference at this hour. His ice-white bristles of decoupageboyed hair just grazed the futon, sending equivocal little prickles into his scalp. "Why'n hell should I have to go hear some dynie-do group audition in an ice-ass studio tomorrow morning?" he asked the ceiling.

*Because it's Christmas,* said the voice; the same damned voice that had been nagging him about *three bells and all's well* all evening. *It's Christmas, Mon, and he's been your right-hand dude these many years. You owe him.*

"Shit," said Ebony. "That's what I owe Bobby-Joe."

He tugged his left earlobe madly. *Deck the Halls* snapped on inside his head and he groaned, tugged the lobe a second time, putting plenty of English on it. The station switched, and the maxillary implant — *BonePhone, Choice of Actual People!* — filled his head with the closing bars of "Lowdown Alley Whore" by the Vampire Spikers (four and climbing). Ebony remembered fondly the contract-switch he'd pulled on the Spikers when he'd discovered them and decided they had marketability. They were lucky he hadn't included a clause to make them donate a bi-monthly pint of blood to his personal detox account at Bellevue.

Even if he had stuck in the drainage clause, they'd have signed it. He was that good. They were that desperate. Ebony knew how to play other folk's desperation.

The deejay came on and said that in compliance with Fed and Mob joint rulings, a medley of carols would be next. Ebony almost yanked his ear off tuning out.

*You can't get rid of me that way, Mon,* the voice said. *I'm not riding the waves, and you didn't get me when you tried to jimmy your implant to pick up a pay station for free. I'm not for everyone, Ebony; just for you, Mon, just for you.*

And in that instant, Ebony recognized the voice. His whole body went into terror mode — a necessary reflex if you chose to live in New York, where a moment's stunned hesitation could mean your vitals spilled hot-'n'-juicy all over the Rialto. Reaction time was all. Ebony gave three short gasps and an anerotic moan, his personal bio-code to summon building Security.

Less than half a minute later, the penthouse was crawling with muscle. Sniffers, seekers, bashers, and



Blum

infiltration analysts clung to the walls, needled every seam of the apartment, and turned up nothing.

"But I heard it, I tell you!" Ebony protested. "What the hell am I paying you bums for, so I get my throat cut in my sleep?" He didn't add *By a dead man*. No sense spending Yule in the Weirde Ward. He prayed they'd turn up something real, some ganja-grazer who'd lizzard into his apartment and had the same voice, the same intonations as ....

No; no way. It couldn't be who he thought it was. The man was dead, gone long before Ebony Tzar's time, though as a devotee of The Sound, Tzar had to I.D. that voice. And when he did, he sweated mercury.

It couldn't be him. But the muscle-man said it couldn't be anybody living.

The last of the pack out the door — a real button-down type, you could smell the refinements of long Mob diplocorps training on him — made soothing sounds. "No one cuts throats any more, Mr. Tzar. Fingershock is state-of-the-art death these days."

"And who says this loono's going to wipe me in state-of-the-art style?" Ebony's thin voice shrieked up the scale and cracked when it hit the ceiling.

The buttndown smiled and produced the necessary plascopy verifications. His offer to stay and go over the statistical projections for Ebony Tzar's death, dismemberment, or mere abduction-to-ransom was declined. The door clicked shut behind him and the alarm system locked in again.

*That wasn't cool, Mon, calling Security like I was a live brother. You don't believe in spirits, fine, but you don't got to go mocking us neither.*

The air before the door began to shimmer. A shadow formed, dreadlocks swinging. Ebony Tzar's lower lip trembled as black ectoplasm took a man-shape he knew and recognized from all those ancient vids he'd studied as a child.

"Marley," he breathed.

*You got it, Mon, said the apparition. Now what you mean, staring so at me? I say, "Expect the first when the bell tolls three," and you panic. Run wild, Mon. Be cool. Take your visitation brave.*

Ebony Tzar felt something stabbing him in the small of the back. He realized that he had backed away from Marley's ghost and had his spine pressed flat against the sadosculpt hanging on the wall all the way across the living space. The nasty sharp pointy rods took the place of the traditional I-must-be-dreaming pinch. Steel drums from the great beyond pounded through his veins. No amount of ear-tugging could switch his channel now.

"What visitation?" he demanded, trying to put a brave face on it. "I don't have time for supernatural shit. You want to see me, access my databook. It's on all the tune-nets."

*Hey, Mon, tuna nets be for fishermen. But this is for your good. Marley's ghost shook his head slowly. It was then that Ebony Tzar saw the chains woven into the heavy dreadlocks.*

"Marley, why — why are you wearing chains?"

*These? The ghost held up a strand of iron links. These I forge myself, Mon. These I wear because I go my way scorning all other faces of The Sound but mine. Each link, he carries music, and I go through*

*death hearing what I never want to hear in life. Marley's fingers counted off several links. This be the final microdisc, Mon: Julie Andrews singing show tunes for my sins. The walls writhed alive with the sound of music. Black fingers played out a few more links, switched tracks to a thin strand of gold chain. And these be because I shot the sheriff, but —*

Ebony howled and dove under the futon. When he ventured to peep out again, Marley's ghost was gone.

Somewhere a bell tolled three.

The air went to jellotown again. It rainbow scrimmed and parted to reveal a girl dressed all in a long white gown with pastel pink poodles embroidered around the hem. Golden hair streamed down her back, right between the swan wings sprouting there, and a luminous gold donut hovered three inches above her head.

"Ebony Tzar, come with me." Her voice was musical. Ebony wasn't surprised, somehow.

Still, he asked. "Wh — where? Why? Who are you?"

"I am the ghost of The Sound Past. Bear but a touch of my hand and tap into the BonePhone of the lost decades." She stretched out her hand to him. The fingers slowly uncurred. Something silvery gleamed in her palm.

"What's that?"

"A high school ring. It's not mine. Go ahead, touch it. I don't have all night. Mom said be home by four."

Hand shaking, Ebony did as he was told. The walls of his penthouse exploded outward in a blaze of ignited hairspray cans and the whole world went Liberace. When the glitz cleared, they were no longer on familiar turf.

"What place is this?" Ebony asked, groping for the angel's hand. They were standing next to an antique juke box that was playing a long-dead Ooo-ooo-Baby Sound.

"Muhammad Ali High, Brooklyn," she replied. "Don't you know it, Ebony? You were a boy here."

Ebony remembered, and recollection brought pain. Through a whirl of poodle skirts and a churn of tight pegged jeans on a dance floor he saw himself — young, sensitive, awash with Clearasil — standing against the far wall of the high school gymnasium. It was the height of the fourth 'Fifties revival, before MobRegs made it illegal to shout Eyyyys! in a crowded theater. All around him beehive hairdos pitched and teetered at unnatural angles, slick-back pompadours exuded oil, and packs of stungum, disguised as long-banned cigarettes, popped out of imperfectly rolled-up T-shirt sleeves.

"Why aren't you dancing, Ebony?" the angel asked kindly, nodding from the now-man to the then-boy. "You like The Sound. You always did."

Ebony Tzar looked away from his miserable then-self, stared down at his bare feet. Both of them canted to the right. "I couldn't remember all the dance steps; the ones I remembered, I got wrong. I tried, but I kept screwing up. None of the girls would ever ask me to dance. And it was all the fault of this goddamn music!" It was a shouted burst of rage, long-suppressed resentment and humiliation. Ebony Tzar smacked the juke box hard. "Rhythm! Melody!

Lyrics! Tunes you can dance to! 'I give it a seventy-three.' Who needs it?"

"You did, Ebony," murmured the angel.

The music changed. The box played a slow number now. The gym lights dimmed and someone spilled a case of dry ice. A sweet-faced girl came through the mist to where the young Ebony Tzar stood alone.

"So ya wanna dance or what?" she asked.

In agony, the living Ebony saw his past self shrug, shuffle his feet, and replay, "Nah." The girl went away.

"Laura Betrudia," the angel whispered. "The most popular girl at Muhammad Ali High; the only human being in your peer group capable of turning a slow dance into a religious experience. She liked you, Ebony. She could have been yours, yet you sent her away. Why?"

"Because I was afraid I couldn't do the slow dances any better than the fast ones." Tears caught in the music mogul's throat.

"And so to avoid the embarrassment of a moment, you gave up the chance of a lifetime. And you took out your anger on The Sound."

"Yes! Yes, it's true! If I couldn't have fun to music that made sense, then I was going to clean it from the ears of the Earth! That's why I always did everything in my power to promote a Sound that could physic a jackal! But I loved all the voices of The Sound. I did!"

"And you still do, don't you?" The angel smiled. "Do not despair, Ebony Tzar. You may yet —"

The high, insistent whine of a train whistle cut through the air. "Uh-oh. Curfew." The angel vanished into the high-tech F/X of the Midnite Special plowing into a souped-up T-Bird stalled on the tracks. She took Ebony's past with her, leaving him standing on a snow-swept streetcorner in the primal dark.

"Wait! Come back! You have to take me back to Laura! I have to tell her I love —" His shouts were to no avail. He tried running after her through the blackness, following the wrenching sound of metal on metal. Instead he ran headfirst into a brick wall.

"Hey, man, nice finish. You got an act or what?"

Ebony sat up, rubbing his head, waiting for his vision to clear. He was pretty sure he'd knocked his ocular 'plants loose. He just couldn't be seeing what his eyes told him he saw. Nothing could be that ugly and live.

"Yo. Sapienoid. I'm talking to you. You Ebony Tzar?"

Weakly he nodded. A hand covered with metal-knobbed leather strips reached down to help him to his feet. His smile a masterwork of Mylar caps, body covered with steel-wool longjohns and more leather strips, the curd-faced creature said, "Testosteronious, man. I mean, really icy. I been looking for you, and you find me. I'm the spirit of The Sound Right Now. Grab on." He stuck out a prosthesis, though what organic it replaced only the Great Mixer knew.

Ebony declined. "Look, I don't want to, O.K.? I mean, why are you bothering with me? I'm set in my tastes. I'm too old to change. Go scare the shit out of

someone younger. I'm sticking to promoting The Sound as I know it. Don't waste time on me."

The spirit grinned, letting Ebony see himself reflected in multiples across several Mylared incisors. He wasn't looking well. His headtufts had flattened down until his hairstatement looked like a Mom-did-it crewcut.

"No taste, no waste. There's always hope. C'mon, I'm gonna show you that there's more than one side to The Sound Right Now, even though you've been trying to stomp it squishside."

With a sigh of resignation, Ebony latched onto the spirit's prosthesis. Immediately the lights went on. They were standing in a sound studio, the same ice-ass studio that Ebony was supposed to be in on Christmas Day.

"Why ... there's Bobby-Joe." Ebony pointed to the paunchy man in hand-me-down doubleknits who was chomping a wad of stungum fit to choke a moose. "What's he doing here?"

"Waiting for you, sapienoid. Waiting to have you give his kid a chance. Just a fair hearing for his kid, that's all he wants for Christmas."

"So where's the kid?" Ebony waved his arms around the vacant studio.

"He's coming. Kid's a little slow when it comes to walking, if you get my drift." Just as the spirit finished, the studio door opened. Leaning on a humble crutch, a radiant smile on his well-scrubbed face, Bobby-Joe's youngest son came hobbling into the studio. Under his arm he carried a guitar.

At least it looked like a guitar.

"Where's the wires?" Ebony asked the spirit.

"None, man. Not on the instrument, and not on the kid."

"But that's — that's obscene! A good 'plant could get that kid's leg moving supersonic. And the equipment won't pick up any Sound worth spitting on from a guitar like that. Where's his amps?"

"No amps. Not for The Sound he's gonna make. Clam tight and listen up, Tzar. Learn something."

Bobby-Joe hurried across the floor to meet his son. "Where's the new guitar, Timmy?" he demanded. "I gave you enough creds to buy the best!"

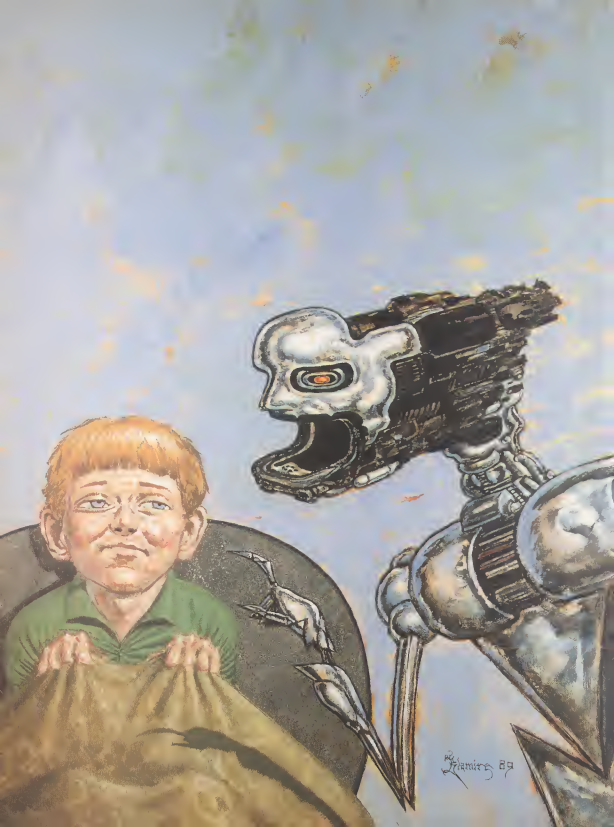
Timmy's smile went up six hundred watts. "I gave them away, Father. There was a poor widow-woman begging outside Grand Central, and she said —"

Bobby-Joe groaned. "Not again! Timmy, you are such a sucker for a sob-story. Got it from your mother's side of the gene-pool. That's what I get for seeing a cut-rate surrogate, I guess, but still ..."

"But Father, it's Christmas!" The kid's face glowed. Ebony tried to remember whether Bobby-Joe had ever been a cultie of the Meltdown Muthuhs. Wearing a little cap of plutonium dangling from the right ear was all the rage with their followers not so long ago. Then the ditto-birds started wearing fake plutonium ear-drops and ruined the social impact for everyone.

"Yeah, it's Christmas." Bobby-Joe put his arm around his boy's shoulder and helped him into the

(Continued to page 57)



pg  
Liaming 89

# The Twisted Brat

By Robert A. Metzger

Art by Larry Blamire

"It's time to get out of bed, Timothy," said Mr. Quigley.

Twelve-year-old Timothy Alan Rinard Junior didn't move, but continued to stare wide-eyed up at the cables, conduits, and snaking steel latticework that ran above him. He was thinking. Had Mr. Quigley been able to glimpse even the faintest images that were currently flitting behind Timothy's pale blue eyes, he would have closed his steel and plastic mouth and simply kept quiet.

"You did not sleep last night, Timothy," said Mr. Quigley, the pitch of his voice tuned just right to impart concern and warmth.

Timothy continued to stare upward.

"Perhaps you aren't feeling well. Would you like me to call the doctor?"

"Toad," said Timothy, who still lay motionlessly in bed.

"Yes, Master," said a deep and rumbling voice that echoed throughout Timothy's bedroom.

"Slag Quigley."

Mr. Quigley rolled back on chrome wheels, and his head spun uncontrollably as if a servo had latched. "This is most inadvisable, Timothy," said Mr. Quigley, his head still spinning, and his voice now screechy and full of panic. "This behavior is morally and ethically unacceptable for someone of your position and with your responsibilities."

An ultraviolet laser, mounted within the steel latticework of the open second floor of Timothy's bedroom, locked on target.

Mr. Quigley had the great misfortune of having backed over a half-eaten pizza, and his wheels, now covered with tomato paste, slipped and spun uselessly over the slick green linoleum floor. "I'll inform the school principal! A young man with your gifts ...."

BANG!

Mr. Quigley no longer had a head. What little remained of it had been transformed into a blob of molten plastic, twisted steel struts, and a few carbonized organics that now dribbled down the front of Mr. Quigley's chest.

"Completed, Master," said the booming voice of Toad. "How do you wish this incident to appear in the re-edited life tapes?"

Timothy thought for a moment as he looked up at the camera mounted in the far corner of his bedroom. This was the second time in just the last month that he'd killed Mr. Quigley. The first time, he had spliced together a little bug that had gone for Mr. Quigley's central processor. Timothy grinned when he replayed those perfect and crisp memories. Before Mr. Quigley was electrocuted during an unsuccessful attempt to

flush himself down the toilet, his disintegrating neural network had fixated on Empress Alexandra, the last of the Czarinas. Mr. Quigley's last hours had been spent in imaginary consultation with the Monk Rasputin and in giving panicked warnings to Czar Nicholas about the plots and plans of Russian peasants. But, of course, the snoops who pored over Timothy's life tapes knew nothing about that. Toad had re-edited the tapes, making everything look like an accident.

"No re-editing," said Timothy. "They expect a certain degree of psychotic behavior. We wouldn't want to make them suspicious. Delete these comments."

"Yes, Master."

Timothy tossed his covers aside and, jumping up from his bed, worked his way between piles of books, comp disks, stolen Phobos core samples, dirty clothes, stuffed amphibians from the Galapagos Islands, age-hardened pizza boxes, and the guts of spewed electronics panels. Finally reaching the far end of his bedroom, he peered into the negative convection hood where he kept his active bio experiments. Slipping on gloves, he stuck his hands inside the hood, reaching for a small storage cabinet in the rear. He pried one of the cabinet's small drawers open just a crack. Chittering sounds came from within it.

"Splice life tape now, Toad," he said.

"Nature of splice, Master."

"Taking nucleotide scans, or possibly inspecting some laser chromatographs. Make it easy on yourself."

"Thank you, Master."

Knowing that Toad was now jamming the surveillance camera with some computer-generated fantasy, Timothy opened the drawer. He licked his lips. "Exit," he said.

A bug crawled out. Structurally, it resembled a Brazilian army ant, with its coal-black, plate-armored back and razored, half-inch-long mandibles that reflexively chomped at the air. However, internal modifications had been made — major modifications. The ant marched forward.

"Halt."

The ant halted.

"Deploy solar accumulator," commanded Timothy.

Three gossamer-thin filaments extended from the ant's back. From the tips of these stalks, membrane-thin bubbles quickly sprouted. The bubbles were curved like the lenses of a magnifying glass.

Timothy took a deep breath. "March," he said.

The army ant turned right and, scuttling toward a two-hundred-watt, unfrosted lightbulb that burned in

the corner of the bio hood, angled its solar accumulators in front of itself.

Timothy smiled.

The ant continued marching.

Timothy reached into the hood, grabbed a pair of welder's goggles, and held them up in front of his eyes. The ant continued to move forward, trapped in the focal point of the bubble-lenses that hovered above it. Its long feelers quickly curled, and its mandibles chomped spasmodically, the *click-click* sound they generated loud enough to be heard above the swish of the bio hood's purge pump.

Timothy giggled.

The ant halted, two of its hind legs suddenly hanging limp, but then dragged itself forward, always moving nearer the blazing lightbulb.

"March," whispered Timothy.

Steam rose from the ant's back. Its curled feelers crumbled, then fell off. It crawled forward in a series of ragged jerks, leaving behind a damp and glistening trail. Boiling internal fluids bubbled up between its armored joints. It shuddered, twitched, and something dark and frothy spewed from between its thrashing mandibles.

Suddenly bursting into oily flame, it exploded like an overheated kernel of popcorn. The gossamer bubble-lenses flashed incandescent blue.

Timothy removed the welder's goggles, dropped them back into the bio hood, and then looked up into the steel latticework above him. He sighed. The air that hissed through his almost closed mouth tasted dirty and stale. His stomach grumbled. He was hungry. But before he could eat, he had to remove all evidence of the unauthorized bio experiment. The snoops routinely scanned his garbage chute, and he could take no chances.

"Twistor access," whispered Timothy.

"Position, Master?" asked Toad.

Timothy didn't want to be *too* close to it when it opened, yet he didn't want to be *too* far away either. He wanted to be able to look down its throat and feel it tug at him. He unconsciously rubbed at the indented part of his forearm, where a piece of him had gotten too near the twistor the first time he had generated it.

"Eye level, three meters in front of me, in the direction of my bed."

"On your command, Master."

"Now!" he shouted.

Lights dimmed for just a second as the carbon dioxide laser first powered up. Timothy squinted his eyes, even though the laser beam's light would be far into the infrared, and quite invisible. In the second floor of his room, the thousand-watt light beam was split, and the two resultant beams shifted slightly out of phase. Three meters in front of him, where the two out-of-phase beams were brought back together, the heated air began to distort. The metallic scent of ozone filled the air.

Timothy took a step back.

The interference of the two slightly out-of-phase beams created a very small high frequency component that caused select atoms in the air to oscillate wildly. While Timothy watched, the electromagnetic energy in the laser beams was being transformed into

gravitational energy through the distortion of the space-time continuum in the region of the oscillating atoms. As the oscillation frequency grew, and space-time curved more and more around each atom, the growing gravitational effects would begin to cause space-time to twist on itself. At least that's how Timothy interpreted the complex mathematics involved in his own version of quantum-gravitational theory.

With the laser beams pouring in even more energy, space-time would twist so severely, and the strain become so great, that it would actually rip. The here and now of a portion of his bedroom would touch the elsewhere and elsewhere of some alien place.

**POP!**

Rushing air scattered Timothy's already unkempt hair, and paper and pizza boxes rattled. Three meters in front of him twirled a funnel of rainbow-streaked light — *the twistor*. He stared down its throat, unable to quite focus on the dark spot at the center of the vortex. Gravitational forces gently tugged him toward the funnel. Again, he unconsciously rubbed at his forearm. Never actually turning his back to the twistor, he reached behind himself and scooped up the remains of the army ant. "Pleasant trip," he whispered, and tossed the charcoaled corpse in the twistor's general direction. The little carcass arced high; then, as if an invisible thread tugged at it, the corpse swerved, sped toward the funnel, and spiraled in.

The army ant vanished. There'd be no evidence of unauthorized bio experiments. The snoops would never find out.

"Twistor off," he said.

The rainbow funnel vanished.

Timothy slowed his breathing and wiped at the sweat that he only now realized was dripping down his forehead. His ego tried to convince him that he hadn't actually been frightened. It almost could. Almost.

"Master?"

Timothy removed his gloves and dropped them into the hood. "Yes," he said.

"Classes start in less than half an hour."

"So?" said Timothy. The time at which a class started had little bearing on when he'd arrive.

"You've been assigned a new instructor, a Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor, for Human Dynamics and Interactions."

"Background?"

Toad was silent. Timothy walked over to the corner of his bed and sat. Reaching down to the floor, he grabbed a not-too-dusty slice of pizza. "Well?" he finally asked after chewing several mouthfuls.

"I can locate no information on any Nets as to the background of Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor."

"That's impossible," said Timothy, dropping his half-eaten pizza slice back onto the floor.

"You are correct, Master."

Timothy decided to go to class.

**H**uman Dynamics and Interactions was held in an almost barren, windowless room. There were two desks, one for Timothy, and one for the instructor. Timothy sat at his desk, staring down at its dead and

black inlaid monitor.

"He's late, Toad," said Timothy.

"Yes, Master," replied Toad from Timothy's wrist link.

"Anyone who keeps me waiting ends up paying for it," said Timothy.

"Yes, Master."

Timothy was vaguely disturbed at the prospect of a new instructor. The previous instructor, Mrs. Flora Armbruster, had lasted almost seven months, a record when it came to Timothy's instructors. Timothy had had her so nicely broken in that she would quietly sit at her desk and knit while he tripped through the Net, playing with people's lives and generating as much havoc as possible. But now he would have to break in a new instructor. Mrs. Armbruster had been easy. It had simply been a matter of getting into the Net and finding weak links. Mrs. Armbruster's weak link had been her 19-year-old son, Lenny, who was currently a Grunt second class, stationed in Shanghai. Timothy had told Mrs. Armbruster that if she did not leave him alone and stop rambling about the value and joys of human interactions, then he would do something unpleasant to Lenny. At first, Mrs. Armbruster had not believed that possible. But after receiving a frantic phone call from Lenny telling her that a Captain Timothy A. Rinard Junior had personally requested his presence in a chem-insurgency squad at the outskirts of Shrinagar, Mrs. Armbruster believed.

She let Timothy do as he pleased.

Lenny's orders to the Kashmir front were recalled.

Timothy knew, however, that Mr. Arnold T.

Twillitor would prove much more difficult than Mrs. Armbruster had. Until this morning, Timothy had thought it impossible for anyone to exist without being indexed in the Net. There were no records on Arnold T. Twillitor. Even Timothy couldn't purge himself from the Net, and he had certainly tried.

The door opened.

Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor walked in.

Timothy laughed. Never in his life had he seen such an ancient Geezoid. He had absolutely no doubt that Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor was of geologic age. He had probably played with a pet trilobite as a boy, used a brontosaurus to get to and from work when he was in his prime, and once retired, had probably spent his leisure time hunched in front of a campfire, drooling into his long white beard, and trading recipes for mastodon stew with the neighborhood Neanderthals.

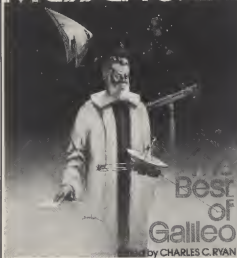
Timothy was no longer worried. Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor would be no match for him.

The old man shuffled in, hugging a single white folder to his narrow chest. Nearly bald, his liver-spotted scalp seemed to glisten in the room's fluorescent lighting. His hands shook like leaves in a gentle breeze.

"You must have made a wrong turn somewhere, old man," said Timothy, barely able to not laugh as he spoke. "The home for Geezoids and Congenital Defectives is downtown." Timothy smiled.

Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor didn't look up, but appeared to be fully occupied with just sliding one foot in front of the other. Finally arriving at the instructor's desk, he reached out one of his palsied, scarecrow hands and tugged out the chair. Sitting slowly, he laid his folder on the desk.

## STARRY MESSENGER.



## A Long Time Ago ...

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo Awards, writers such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner and more.

We think he did a fine job at *Galileo*, and, in fact, it was on the strength of that performance that we picked him to help turn *Aboriginal Science Fiction* into the first successful SF magazine in a decade.

Now, on his behalf, we'd like to give you an opportunity to see some of the best stories he collected a decade ago.

*Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors: Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, Alan Dean Foster, Connie Willis, John Kessel, Kevin O'Donnell Jr., D.C. Poyer, M. Lucie Chin, Joe L. Hensley & Gene DeWeese, John A. Taylor, Gregor Hartmann, and Eugene Potter.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. If you would like your copy autographed, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

To order, send \$11 for each copy to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, Book Dept., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.

Timothy was certain that he heard bones creak.

Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor opened the folder.

"You deaf, Geezoid?" asked Timothy.

Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor leaned forward, peering at the contents of the open folder through his cataract-hazed brown eyes.

"Earth to Geezoid," said Timothy as he laughed. He felt disappointed, as he realized just how easy this was going to be.

Mr. Arnold T. Twillitor slowly closed the folder and looked up. "Call me Arnie," he said in a surprisingly strong and steady voice. "I am here to replace Mrs. Armbruster."

"What happened to her?" asked Timothy, not really all that interested, but more curious to see what Arnie's artery-hardened brain would come up with. Toad could get him whatever information he *really* wanted.

Arnie smiled. He had no teeth. To Timothy, it looked as if the old man's gums had been filed to razor sharpness. "I ate her," said Arnie.

Timothy blinked. Not only had they sent him a Geezoid for a new instructor, they had sent a Geezoid whose few original brain cells had already short-circuited and died.

"You ate her?" asked Timothy, humoring the ancient man, eager to see what other tidbits of insanity he had to offer.

"Of course," said Arnie, "I needed to metabolize the basic materials to construct this body." He waved a shaking hand in front of himself.

Timothy nodded. "That's understandable," he said. "I know how it can be, moving to a new place, and realizing that you left your old body behind."

Arnie nodded and smiled. "I'm glad to see that you understand," he said.

Timothy stood. "Well, Arnie," he said, "it's been an experience I'll cherish for the rest of my life, but I've got to go now."

"You haven't been dismissed," said Arnie.

Timothy smiled, and walked toward the door.

Arnie pointed a skeleton-like finger at him.

Timothy's vision blurred, and he thought something wiggled inside his head. He felt himself twitch, sensed that the walls of the room folded on themselves, turned inside out, then rotated until they were once again in their original position. Timothy found himself seated in his chair.

"I recommend that you do not move," said Arnie.

"I guarantee that next time I will not be so kind as to disengage external sensory stimuli before I translate you. I'm told the feeling is similar to having your skin peeled off and the remaining carcass then turned inside out." Arnie smiled, his eyes disappearing in the pale folds of his face.

Timothy didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't even think. For the first time in his short life, his brain was totally blank except for a few fear signals being fired from random synapses.

"Mind if I talk for a few minutes?" asked Arnie.

Timothy didn't move.

"Thank you," said Arnie. He reopened the folder and looked down at it. He cleared his throat. "Timothy Alan Rinard Junior, conceived at the GenRes Labs

August 12, 1998, born GenRes Labs April 23, 1999." He looked up and peered at Timothy. "By the look of you, I'd say the best part of your genetic makeup dribbled down the outside of your test tube." He smiled, and again his eyes seemed to disappear. "And just who was Timothy Alan Rinard Senior?" he asked. "Possibly a high-speed centrifuge, or perhaps a beaker of brown sludge that a biotech found in the back of a refrigerator?"

Timothy said nothing. He had added the *Junior* himself, when he was young, when he had thought that things like parents and family might have been important. He had long since outgrown such concepts, but had never gotten around to changing his name back to the original.

Arnie cackled like a turkey that was getting its tail feathers plucked, then looked back down at the folder. "Kept in the GenRes Creche school for your entire life. They tried to mainstream you once at the age of four, but the result was one dead collie, a burned-down house, and an adopted brother who got his eardrums punctured and three toes of his left foot removed." Arnie looked up and wagged a bony finger at Timothy. "Your records label you as a sociopathic brat." Arnie tugged at the long, wiggly lobes of his ears. "Wouldn't they just love to know all the details about those genetically scrambled army ants of yours?" Arnie closed the folder.

Suddenly, Timothy thought he understood what this was all about. They'd somehow found out about the ants, and this was some sort of punishment. This was all the fault of those damn ants.

"You scare them, boy," said Arnie. "They believe that they might have created something that isn't quite human." Again Arnie smiled, showing his razor-sharp gums. "But of course that comes as no surprise to you. You came to that same conclusion long before they did."

Sweat ran into Timothy's eyes. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to hit and tear at something.

"None of that really matters to me, though," said Arnie. "What does matter is that you have managed to bring yourself to my *personal* attention."

Timothy wanted to shake his head, prove that he'd done nothing, but wasn't about to risk moving. He had no desire to find out what it would feel like to have his skin peeled off.

"You punctured space-time, you miserable brat," said Arnie. "That little twistor of yours is continually spewing garbage into my sector of reality."

*The twistor.* Timothy suddenly knew that Arnie came from the elsewhere and elsewhere that his twistor had touched. Timothy wanted to crawl inside his own head and die.

"But instead of simply reducing you to fundamental quarks as punishment for your irresponsible behavior, I'm going to do you a favor." He smiled wide, his razored gums sparkling. "I've taken a liking to you, boy, and I've decided to become your new Human Dynamics and Interactions instructor." Arnie stood very slowly, his bones creaking. "Your first lesson will consist of a field trip."

"No!" Timothy silently screamed, the word echo-



ing only inside his own head.

Arnie waved his hand, and the entire far wall of the classroom blurred, then transformed itself into a plane of swirling, throbbing, rainbow-colored twisters. "Be sure to take notes, Timothy."

Gravity tugged at Timothy and dragged him and his desk across the floor. He quickly gathered speed.

"It may be painful," said Arnie.

Tidal forces ripped at Timothy. His head sheared from his shoulders, and his feet popped from their ankles. By the time he slammed into the wall of rain-bowed twisters, traveling at nearly the speed of light, he was little more than a red smear — a fully feeling, fully conscious, red smear. Arnie hadn't lied — it was painful.

"Open your eyes, brat."

Timothy opened his eyes. A horizon of warped and broken glass slabs seemed incredibly close. The cloudless sky was tinted red, and the air was filled with finger-sized gnats. Timothy looked down at his feet. He couldn't see them. He stood knee-deep in empty pizza boxes, charcoaled Brazilian army ants, and a nearly infinite number of bits and pieces from the multiple incarnations of Mr. Quigley.

"Quite a mess."

Timothy turned toward the sound of the voice. Arnie hovered about a foot above the ground, framed by an impossibly large blood-red sun.

"This is where I live," said Arnie, waving a hand in the direction of the nearby horizon.

Timothy said nothing.

"Don't you think it's a beautiful place?" asked Arnie.

Timothy accidentally snorted a giant gnat that got too near his nose. Gagging and coughing, he spit the remains onto the ground.

Arnie shook his head. "You may be right, boy. The neighborhood has run down a bit." He looked toward the horizon. "You should have seen this place a few billion years ago. It was a nice place to live then — full of people and laughter, trees and birds, loving and dying, helping and hurting. But *some* people had not learned how to appreciate that."

Timothy wiped the corners of his mouth of remaining gnat residue. "What happened?" he asked without really thinking. He cringed, realizing that he had just spoken. He expected his skin to be peeled or his eyeballs to be poked at with sharp sticks.

Arnie floated down, and then hobbled a few steps towards him. "It was the doing of the Twisted Brat," he whispered.

Timothy just stared at him.

"The Twisted Brat was the first on *this* world to stumble across Twistor Physics," he said, staring right back at Timothy.

Timothy swallowed past the suddenly formed lump in his throat.

"You see," said Arnie, "The Twisted Brat was convinced that he was better than everyone else. He no longer wanted to be one of the people, since he believed the people no longer wanted to be a part of him. So one day, he opened a twistor, then a second, then a third, and then more and more. The twisters sucked

away the people, the trees, the clouds, and then even the atmosphere. Only the Twisted Brat remained."

Arnie suddenly shook his head, sending the loose skin of his face flapping. "But that's all ancient history, and probably of no interest to someone like yourself." Arnie squinted and stared at Timothy. "Isn't that right?" he shouted.

"Right," Timothy managed to squeak back.

"That's what I thought," said Arnie. "What is important is that after a few billion years, the atmosphere regenerated itself, these marvelous little insects evolved from the surviving slimes and bacterias, and this world is now the perfect place for your first lesson in Human Dynamics and Interactions."

A cold breeze suddenly blew, seeming to suck the warmth from Timothy. He shook.

"Cold?" asked Arnie. He smiled, his razored gums looking bloody in the red light.

Timothy shook his head.

"As I was saying, then," continued Arnie, "this world is the perfect place for your first lesson." Arnie twitched his nose.

A notebook and pencil materialized in Timothy's hands.

"It will be important to take notes," said Arnie.

Timothy clutched the pencil, preparing to copy down whatever Arnie said.

"My first lecture is entitled: *Brazilian Army Ants Are People, Too.*"

Timothy tried to drop the pencil and notebook. He wanted to bury himself beneath the pile of garbage he stood in. Nothing happened. His hand, seeming to have a mind of its own, scribbled down the title of the lecture. He no longer controlled his own body.

"Or this lecture could be subtitled: *What Goes Around Comes Around.*"

Timothy wanted to scream. His hand wrote down the lecture's subtitle.

"Ready to start?" asked Arnie.

Timothy felt his head nod.

"Excellent."

Timothy felt himself wither inside. He knew what was coming next. He knew beyond any doubt.

"Deploy solar accumulator," commanded Arnie.

Something twitched in Timothy's back, and he felt skin stretch, then rip. The pain was excruciating, but he knew it was nothing compared to what was about to come. His neck craned back, and he could see three filaments rise above his head. As he watched, membrane-thin bubbles quickly sprouted from their tips. The bubbles were curved like the lenses of a magnifying glass.

Arnie took a deep breath, causing his caved-in chest to expand to an almost impossible thickness. "March," he said.

Timothy felt his feet move. He walked through trash, almost slipping on a piece of partially petrified pizza. He turned right, and now, walking toward the blood-red sun, felt the solar accumulators angle forward.

Arnie smiled. "Remember to take notes," he said. A pair of welder's goggles materialized in his hands, and he held them up to his eyes. "Memories grow dim,

boy. A billion years from now, when it becomes your turn to pass on the lessons I'm about to teach you, the notes will come in handy." With the sound of distant thunder, a yellowed and cracked parchment notebook materialized in front of Arnie, hovering in midair.

Timothy didn't think even a billion years would dim the memories of what he was about to experience. He watched his shaking hand begin to write. *Searing light blisters my skin and curls my hair.*

Steam rises ...

## ABORIGINES

By Laurel Lucas

# Mischievous

Although our editor has labeled this issue (with all the mischievous glee of a former Catholic schoolboy) the blasphemy issue, the religious theme of some of the stories produced the opposite reaction from several contributors I spoke with. **Lucy Synk**, who illustrates **Ralph E. Vaughan's** "A Measure of Faith," says reading a story where the main character is a Catholic man of real faith was "delightful, a nice change," and she found the story both thought-provoking and upbeat. In "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 31: The Covenant" by **James Morrow**, a robot named SATAN uses humankind's own actions to argue against the Ten Commandments. Although SATAN seems to make a lot of sense, illustrator **Pat Morrissey** saw this as consistent with Lucifer's true character, to mask evil intent with appealing argument. So she included in her artwork the Biblical symbol of evil, the snake.

Ralph Vaughan wrote "Fluxed in Nova Byzantium" in our Nov.-Dec. 1987 issue. He has been nominated for a

Pushcart Prize for best short story in a small press publication for "Endangered Species" in *Pandora*. His recent stories include "Rogue Dreamer" in *Other World* magazine and "The Mystery of the Bag Lady's Bundle" in *Teen* magazine. He is working on some



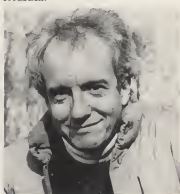
Pat Morrissey

other stories for juveniles and says his oldest child, age 12, is "almost ready to

become a teenager and becomes a nuisance in libraries."

Vaughan says he is in good health now, but had the misfortune to come down with pneumonia three times in the past year, once while on vacation down south. "Louisiana and pneumonia is a deadly combination," he says.

Lucy Synk went to ArchCon this past summer in St. Louis and won an award for best professional artist. She's been displaying the paintings she did for "Measure" at conventions and says they've provided curiosity about *Aboriginal SF* as well as "excellent feedback."



James Morrow

James Morrow divides his time between writing SF and "projects that pay more reliably," like articles for *TV Guide*. His novel, *This is the Way the World Ends*, was a Nebula finalist in 1986, and he won a Nebula this year for Best Short Story for "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge." He has stories appearing in the first two volumes of the Bantam/Spectra series



Ralph E. Vaughan

Nov./Dec. 1989

*What Might Have Been?* coming out this year. Morrow likes religious themes. His newest novel, *Only Begotten Daughter*, recounts the coming of Jesus Christ's divine half-sister to contemporary Atlantic City.

The father of two lists his hobbies as jogging, the armchair study of science, and film-going. And when it comes to films, guess what, he loves "Hollywood Biblical spectacles."

Pat Morrissey has two pieces going into a fantasy and science fiction art show being held at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington from December 8, 1989, to February 11, 1990. She has been working on some covers, "New Age stuff," and personal pieces



Lois Tilton

these days. She and her husband have converted fully half of their country home into studios, and Pat's illustration room is now separate from the graphic arts room. "No more rubber cement in my paintings," she says.

Lois Tilton is the author of "To Dust," set in a future world where "religious" means "insane." Tilton is a teacher of philosophy and a mother of two who sold her first story to *Dragon* magazine in 1986 and has been getting published all over the place since then. This year she has two stories in *Weird Tales*, one in *Women of Darkness II*, and one in *Sword and Sorceress VI*. "To Dust" is her first "strictly SF sale" and she's "quite happy about this breakthrough."

Tilton says she is working on her third novel. This one is about sex and "will offend EVERYONE," she says.

"To Dust" is illustrated by Lori Deitrick, who lives in Alaska with artist-husband David Deitrick and their two kids. Lori got her start painting wildlife scenes on moose and caribou antlers for the tourist trade. Then she moved into children's magazines and commercial work. She followed her husband into the fantasy and science fiction fields.

When I spoke to Lori, the Deitricks were two weeks away from leaving Alaska for Alabama so David could go



Lori Deitrick

back to school. "Life is an adventure," Lori says, but she adds, "we have to find Shangri-la pretty soon; we're getting tired of moving."

"The Doo-Wop Never Dies" by Esther Friesner is a zany spoof of a famous Dickens tale. Friesner is the same person who wrote the amusing poem "Who Made the Stew on Betelgeuse II?" in our Sept.-Oct. 1988 issue. When I spoke to her, she had just signed a contract with Ace Books for a humorous fantasy trilogy, and the third book in her *Here Be Demons* trilogy, *Hurray for Hollywood*, is due out from Ace in January 1990.

Friesner was particularly excited about a book coming out in October as part of the *Chronicles of the Twelve Kingdoms*. It's called *The Water King's Laughter*, and one of its main charac-



Esther M. Friesner

ters was influenced by a friend's child with Down's Syndrome who shattered her "preconceived notions." She says she is donating 15 percent of the net proceeds from the book to the Connecticut Special Olympics. Friesner, who

hates to be typecast, is working on a "pretty horrifying" novel.

"The Doo-Wop" is illustrated by Larry Blamire. As a full-time theatre person and part-time illustrator, Blamire has spent his summer revising some of his plays and planning some staged readings of others.

Blamire, whose prolificacy for *Aboriginal SF* is matched only by his friend Courtney Skinner's, says he wants to congratulate Skinner on the Boomerang Award he was given by our readers for most popular illustration. Blamire says, "I know the painstaking work he puts in."

Blamire also did the illustrations for "The Twisted Brat" by Robert A. Metzger, who is competing with Patricia Anthony for the honor of being our most frequent contributor, and has his third science column in this issue.

Bob is working on a second novel (his first effort is with his agent), the California resident recently tried to



Phillip C. Jennings

drive from his home in Woodland Hills to L.A., only to discover, "You can't get there from here." The freeways were gridlocked.

"Rough Character," by Philip C. Jennings, reveals heretofore unknown dangers that can await fiction writers. Jennings is also the author of "Doctor Quick," which appeared in our Sept.-Oct. 1988 issue. His short story collection, *The Bug Life Chronicles*, was published by Baen Books. When I spoke to him, he had "short stories scattered about" and was "plugging away at various novels," the latest one tentatively titled *Vorms*.

Jennings was looking forward to traveling to the Jet Propulsion Lab to witness Voyager II's flyby of Neptune and called it "the biggest thrill I can think of." But when I pushed him to tell me the really interesting things he was up to, I got him to reveal that he had just paved his driveway.

"Rough Character" is illustrated

by **Wendy Snow-Lang**. Wendy claims to have done "ninety percent" of the work on the illustrations because her husband, **Charles Lang**, was tied up with other work, but she says he did contribute "ideas and composition" and served as the model.

Charles was finishing up another husband-wife collaboration, the wraparound cover and seven interior illustrations for the anthology *Night Visions* No. 7 from Dark Harvest Publishers. "Want," the short story told in graphic form which Wendy wrote and illustrated, is appearing in issue No. 4 of the magazine *Taboo*.

The concept of death is explored in the story "Variations on a Theme" by **Graham P. Collins**. Collins calls himself a Kiwi from New Zealand and is a graduate student in physics at State University of New York at Stony Brook. He says, "I guess this makes me doubly appropriate as a writer for *Aboriginal SF*; I'm from Down Under and I'm a legal alien!" Collins has sold poems to *Pandora* and *StarLine*, and he writes a satirical column and occasional science articles for the small press magazine *Phlogiston*. "Variations" is his first short story sale.

Collins loves to play Go and recently started a Go club. He also helped with the planning of an art exhibit called "Physics Art."

"Variations" is illustrated by **Robert J. Pasternak**, who says the story fits in with his own work on the theme of life and technology intertwined. At the time he first read the story, he was working on a series of silk-screen prints that would start in one di-



Graham P. Collins

rection and slowly change. When he realized that variations on a theme were "exactly what I was doing," that

became the name for his series.

Puzzles and puzzle pieces also spring up in Pasternak's work, and he says he was thrilled to find a store that sells blank puzzles. He likes to paint them and sell them at conventions.

**James S. Dorr** brings us the poem "Were-being Split Personality Jazz." Dorr is also the author of the poem "Elemental Vamp" in the Sept.-Oct. 1988 issue. He says he recently got a big thrill, his "first real live royalty payment" for a story that appeared in the anthology *Shock Treatment*. He has been working on some short stories, is trying to sell a novel, and has started taking part in writers' panels at area SF conventions.

Dorr says his "perpetually hungry cat" Vanessa died in June, and now he's getting used to a new male Himalayan cat. Dorr is also a semi-professional recorder player, and his group has been playing at madrigal dinners and wine festivals and will probably appear at an Illinois Renaissance fair this fall.

**A** John W. Campbell Memorial Award was given to **Bruce Sterling** for *Islands in the Net* (Morrow) as best novel of 1988. The third Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award was given to

(Continued to page 54)

## A special anthology

The Best of Hugo Award Nominee

# ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind

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Ian Watson

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*Aboriginal Science Fiction* has been nominated for a Hugo Award for two years in a row. The final decision this year will be made by the fans who are attending or supporting Noreason Three, the World Science Fiction convention held Labor Day weekend in Boston.

Now is your chance to see some of the best stories and art from *Aboriginal's* first seven issues — the issues for which it was nominated last year for the 1988 Hugo. We have published a special 80-page full-color, full-size, full-slick collection of stories and art from those early issues — the issues which were originally not published on slick paper.

The anthology is 8½ by 11 inches in size and contains 12 stories along with 19 pages of full-color art. It has 80 pages chock full of great entertainment.

The special anthology includes the following stories:

- "Search and Destroy" by Frederik Pohl
- "Prior Restraint" by Orson Scott Card
- "The Milk of Knowledge" by Ian Watson
- "Sing" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
- "Merchant Dying" by Paul A. Gilster
- "It Came From the Slushpile" by Bruce Bethke
- "An Unfiltered Man" by Robert A. Metzger
- "Containment" by Dean Whitlock
- "Passing" by Elaine Radford
- "What Brothers Are For" by Patricia Anthony
- "The Last Meeting at Olduvai" by Steven R. Boyett
- "Regeneration" by Rory Harper

The special anthology is bound to be a collector's item. It retails for \$4.50. You can order it direct from us for \$4.50 plus \$1.00 postage and handling. Send your check or money order for \$5.50 to: *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888.

# Rough Character

(Continued from page 29)

this room really lives with Gitana."

Claire shuddered. "She should have her committed. We're talking about someone disengaged from reality. The writer brings this out by contrasting the present situation with Gitana's past ambitions."

"But were they her ambitions?" Hugh inquired, stabbing the air with his pipe. "Maybe they were the ambitions of a proud father. Now that he's dead, she's not motivated any more."

After class Ben hung around to answer questions. "Excuse me," I blurted, and chased after Laura's diminishing figure. She went to the library and settled in for what looked like a few hours' study. I ran back, tore through the faculty lounge for a campus directory —

"Coming?" Ben's face poked in.

"I can't yet," I puffed. "Ah, here, Laura Hilgen. Can I have a copy of Gitana's character sketch?"

Ben handed it over. "Do you need me to wait?"

"I can try to get back in an hour. I think I know Gitana, and I'm supposed to — well, we're relatives," I lied.

"You don't think that's her real name?"

"How many Gitanas are there in this part of the world?" I asked. "Just wait, okay? I'll make it up to you."

"The building will close soon," Ben said. "I'll be by the car."

"Thanks!" I sped off.

Laura's basement apartment was only two blocks from campus. I stood at the door and listened to chink-thump, chink-thump.

I knocked. "Is that you?" a voice called.

"No."

Gitana opened the door. Nothing had prepared me for this. I thought I was going to confront the bride in a Polish-wedding joke. Laura had neglected to mention that Gitana was beautiful!

And bulging with muscle, and shiny with sweat. She lofted her dumbbell and did a menacing one-armed curl. "You'll never believe this," I began.

I talked my way inside. At last I ran out of words. "I was just supposed to tell you the first part," I said. "About preparing to be showered with gifts."

She frowned. "All I have to do is say 'yes' and it all falls into my lap? Everything I ever dreamed of?"

"I never meant to find you. Luck carried me almost to your door. I had this theory, but no mad Professor Frengl could arrange a coincidence like this!"

"What if I say no?" Her eyes took on distant focus.

I shrugged.

Chink-thump, chink-thump. "Luck, but not perfect luck, it requires an assent of will. Can I think about this?"

"That's what I did," I answered.

To cool off she pulled off her sweatshirt, went to the fridge, and poured herself a tall glass of cider. Bare-breasted young women are often friendly, but

she didn't offer me anything. "What do we have in common?" she asked, plunking herself down on the sofa. "You, me, and Reverend Baleses?"

Thanks to that character sketch I knew about her. "We all started out lonely and vaguely depressed. Dead-ended."

"Like ninety percent of humankind?" She slung down her drink. "I have your number. Give me till tomorrow."

I found my way back to Ben, and the car. "Want to talk about it?" he asked as he wheeled into nighttime traffic.

"You saw my Professor Frengl story, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yup."

"It's not true. I had four other ideas, and now I have to fall back on one of them. Four universal conspiracy theories. One's got to be right, and I think you know which."

Ben chewed his lip. "You wouldn't be going wonky on me? Overwork?"

I laughed. "Let's rehearse. My 'good' theory: do you regard yourself as a lucky man? Okay, there's this hospital and this disease — a lot of people are laid up. Their morale suffers, and that slows the healing process. But this is a special hospital, with a bunch of helmets. Stick patients' heads in the helmets and they dream themselves into a simulated reality. In that reality everything goes wonderfully, and their morale shoots up. They're cock-of-the-walk, and they heal real fast. The only problem is how to return them to the true world after it's all over. I could make this a horror story, I guess. The hospital removes the helmets, but the patients stay in that other universe."

"Sounds good to me."

"It's got flaws," I said. "Why intrude Doctor Faust covenants into the simulation? Plot two tries to answer that. There's a world-soul, an agglomeration of minds. You choose whether to join, and even after you join you aren't conscious of more than your part of the full magnitude, but what happens is you 'naturally' cooperate with your other bodies. Take me. What's my luck, other than the fact that you gave me a job, and Lucy her love, and Mr. Bradninch is willing to spend money the way I like? It's all cooperation, and chances are I'll 'naturally' do nice things for my soul-brothers and sisters —"

Ben shook his head. "That's why businessmen join lodges. It's called networking."

I shrugged. "I'll sketch it in a context of Elks or Masons, only with this sinister soul-blob eating everyone up, and nobody noticing."

Ben kept silent through a complex intersection. "Want to hear my third idea?" I asked.

"Not if you keep up this crazy talk. Sam, I hate to see you hover at the edge of paranoia."

"I'm a writer. I create characters and pop them into imaginary worlds. Since Homer the human race has always been big on storytelling, and we've gotten better at it. Theater, dance, comix, movies — it's not just words anymore." I readied myself for the big plunge. "So suppose in the future our craft improves beyond sight and sound, and instead of reading a book,



the customer actually gets to live a life! Pretty nice, only real lives don't follow the rules of drama. No grand climax, no happily ever after."

Ben frowned. "I don't follow."

I paused, then spoke from an eerie sense of calm, despite the adrenalin pumping into my system. "We're talking about a truly powerful future artist who can take a snapshot of past reality. He starts by taking a picture, and then doing a bit of retouching; trying to improve things. See, Ben, I jumped the gun. There's reading a story, and writing it: two clean different things. What's happening to me, and Reverend Balesse, and Gitana, is that our careers are still being reshaped, roughed out by an artist with the powers of God."

Ben's knuckles whitened on his wheel as I continued. "That explains why we're so crudely programmed with as-yet senseless luck. At least I hope it explains it, because otherwise I'd think that the artist just isn't very good. A second-rate master."

He pulled over, and parked under a streetlight. He reached under his seat and pulled out a knife. "You knew?"

"It seemed natural you'd paint yourself into the picture. Hitchcock always took cameo roles in his own realities. Surely you'd hover near enough to enjoy the show. Chicago of the 1990s, and here too, echoically, you play a second-rate creator. Don't be offended. There are so many of our caliber, and so few of true high talent!"

Ben slumped and closed his eyes. "It was going to be a love-triangle: you, Lucy, and Gitana. Ever notice what I did to your body? Flat stomach, champion endowments? Hey, I snuck lumberjacking into your resume to explain your *Red Jehax* thews without so much as a peep out of you! Christ, a month ago you were five feet four, a hundred twenty pounds soaking wet, with glasses — so don't think I wasn't subtle! Only it's true I hadn't quite ironed out all the details. Next rework I'll leave Reverend Balesse out of the story, or make it obvious that there really is such a thing as magic. You wouldn't have caught on if you hadn't been a skeptic about sorcery. I could play up some African mumbo-jumbo —"

"Next time?" My mind raced.

"Or I could have you die now, and save my other plot-lines. My audience will appreciate that. In these stories you've got to kill off someone likable to introduce that element of insecurity —"

"KILL ME?" I made myself calm down. "Not as a god, though. Push DELETE on me and you punch holes through your creation."

"That's why I've got the knife. Chalk it up to Ben Oslo's creative jealousy. Haven't you given good ol' Ben reason to grow jealous? Haven't you just about taken over his old job and reputation?"

This out of Ben's own mouth. I turned. "Ben, I'm sorry. I told you I had four theories. Now consider where we stand. If you're part of a hospital simulation to cheer me up, then you're not real and there's no harm killing you. Or maybe you're part of this world-soul thing, just like me." I shrugged, and he pressed the point of his knife against my stomach. "If that's the case, that soul's caught a bad case of suicidal

schizophrenia."

"Uhn!" Ben grunted. I wondered what would happen when I grabbed. Luck, marvelous luck! The knife was in my hand now. Ben shrank back against the door.

"Or maybe you're an artist, using my life as raw material without my permission —"

"Beg pardon, but you gave permission. Enough to satisfy the scruples of my century's oversight board. The Balesse scene, remember?"

"The final, fourth theory: I'm insane. My luck never really happened, you're just some dummy who picked up a hitchhiker north of Chicago."

I jabbed the knife into the meat of his belly. Ben fought, and bled. Too late I dragged him out of the car; the seats and my torn clothes were covered with blood. We were on a major thoroughfare, the time not quite midnight. It was almost certain that if I were a madman, someone would see my crime in the glare of the arc-light overhead, and I could hardly hope to escape arrest.

A all-obscuring fog rolled in even as Ben groaned his last.

If I was lavished with crude luck by a false god who could no longer toy with my life, the future was now open-ended. I'd read Ben's stories, and knew I'd been raised up for a purpose. No doubt he was poised with a load of plot thickeners that would soon run me ragged, but now Sam Dawlish, two-fisted comic book editor, simply didn't have to play his game. I was a run-amok figment of Ben's dead imagination, and yes, from now on his reality belonged to me!

Free! Free and aimless, as random as any real human being, with the advantage that I knew more than anyone else how a Ben Oslo-scripted universe could work to my benefit. Hell, he was my idol! I could write Ben Oslo stories in my sleep! I must have been a macabre sight, grinning like a fool while I tore off my bloodstained garments. Even now it embarrasses me to remember that all I could think was: Hot damn! This was going to be fun! □

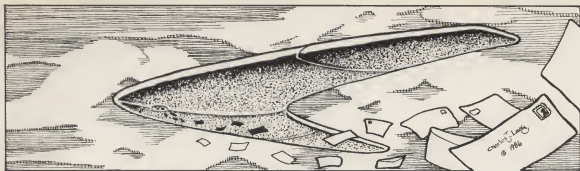
## Aborigines

(Continued from page 51)

**George Alec Effinger** for "Schrodinger's Kitten" (*Omn*) as best short story of 1988.

Effinger's story "No Prisoners" will appear in an upcoming issue of *Aboriginal*.

Second and third place winners of the Campbell Award were **Kim Stanley Robinson** for *The Gold Coast* and **Anne McCaffrey** for *Dragonsdawn*. Second and Third places for the Sturgeon Award were **John Kessel** for "Mrs. Shummel Exits a Winner" and **Steven Popkes** for "The Color Winter." The awards were presented by the Center for Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas on July 22 at the annual Campbell Award Conference. □



## BOOMERANGS

## Comments From Our Readers

To our wonderful readers:

We at *Aboriginal* receive a distressing amount of mail that begins "Dear Sirs" or "Gentlemen." If you look at the names of the editorial staff listed on the contents page, you'll find that eight out of fourteen of us are women. While it may be acceptable in the business world to begin a letter with "Dear Sirs," we nevertheless feel singled out.

We would not be offended by "Dear Sir or Madam," "To Whom It May Concern," or simply "Dear Whomever." We realize that these forms of address are longer than "Dear Sirs," but we feel that using them will not tax the capabilities of our readers.

We simply wish to bring this matter to your attention. We would all feel much better if our contributions were recognized.

Hopefully,  
The Staff

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I am enclosing a check for \$26 (\$24 for my twelve issues, and \$2 for the anthology). I have also enclosed a self-addressed-stamped-envelope (SASE) for your writer's guidelines. I have several ideas for a story swirling around in my skull, and maybe one of these days I will put it down on paper. Please send the guidelines just in case.

I have received and finished my May/June 1989 issue, and was shocked to find some pages missing (pgs. 13-15 and 49-52). I would like to know if this was a general mistake on everybody's issue or if some force out there picked my issue specifically. (Most likely a goof at the binding plant on your copy. — Ed.) What wasn't missing was good, especially Robert A. Metzger's "A Symbiotic Kind of Guy," and your Alien Publisher's column entitled "To Serve Man."

My first issue was the November/December 1988 issue, so I am a newcomer. But what I have read so far, I enjoy. The reason I first subscribed to *Aboriginal* was to learn more about writing SF short stories — some people

take classes, I order magazines ... I had no idea of what I was going to get, having never subscribed to a science fiction magazine before. What I received surpassed my expectations. Colorful artwork, great stories, informative book reviews, and more! (Sounds kind of like an advertisement, doesn't it? But it's true.) I also discovered that you accepted stories from amateur writers, and, well, I am sending for my writer's guidelines.

One last thing. Please consider printing monthly issues instead of bimonthly ones. Two months is an awfully long time to wait. For now, I'll wait eagerly; they say patience is a virtue. At least *Aboriginal Science Fiction* is worth waiting for. Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,  
Hoolio Marsden  
Santa Maria, CA

Dear *Aboriginal*,

The first time I heard about this magazine was when I bought the 1988 *FWM* and began sending for samples. I loved the sample so much that I ordered a subscription.

The sample that was sent to me was the May/June '88 issue, and inside was the most moving story — "Sweet Tooth at Io." It instantly made me a fan of Patricia Anthony.

Robert A. Metzger's "What If" science section is very interesting, and I'm very glad you will continue with this. My college physics is as stale as the rest of my science, and this really helps. He also has a clear way of speaking about such complex ideas that makes them easy to understand. "Quantum Dots" was great, thanks!

Editor Charles C. Ryan's "Lepton Power II" was also enlightening and satisfying. I enjoyed it greatly.

In contrast to what one of your readers stated, I love reading the "Aborigines" section. Too often readers are given no information on the contributors. I would greatly miss this section, and it is always the second thing I

read.

As for the "Boomerangs" section, it is always entertaining and often enlightening.

Thank you for a finely balanced, entertaining, enlightening, and graphically lovely magazine!

Sincerely,  
Carol A. Pierce  
Portland, OR

Dear Mr. Ryan,

Now that school's out it is once again time for me to turn my attention to summertime activities: spelunking, chasing thunderstorms, and writing letters to editors. So here I am, writing to you.

The stories continue to delight me, and, I must admit, "In the Shadow of Bones" has turned me into a full-fledged Robert A. Metzger fan. (That reminds me that I do have a small bone to pick with you, after all. When you printed my letter in the March/April '89 issue, you said that I was in Arizona. The postal abbreviation "AR" stands for Arkansas.) (A typo we missed. Sorry. — Ed.) By the way, I really enjoyed Byron Taylor's artwork in that issue, especially the piece on page 37. And, as long as I'm talking about your art, never, ever let Pat Morrissey quit doing stuff for *Aboriginal*!

My physicist/biologist friend I talked about last time finally got around to reading his backlog of *Aboriginal* issues and ran across Dr. Metzger's story about the evil graduate adviser. Rather than getting bad ideas, my friend merely wished all his advisers had been so nice. Sigh. I guess it's okay if he has a flat tire now, I can give him back his tire iron.

Tell the Alien Publisher I said hello and also tell Harlan Ellison and Darrell Schweitzer to behave — didn't their mothers teach them that nice little boys mustn't fight in public?

Yours truly,  
Mary Doolittle  
State University, AR

Dear *Aboriginal*,

I'd like to say how much I enjoyed Patricia Anthony's "Bluebonnets" in the July/August *Aboriginal*, and I can understand why she considers it her "favorite short story so far." It's a deeply moving tale, something that's refreshing to see in this genre.

Too often SF stories conform to the rigid constraints of the exclusive society of SF writers and fans: hard SF only, with no fantasy elements, no human emotion. This you-shall-worship-no-god-before-me elitism, verging on bigotry, coupled with mainstream elitism, is what keeps SF in the ghetto. (Of course, sci-fi TV and movies like *Star Wars* have to take some of the blame.)

In some short fiction, SF is a story element rather than a genre. And that's good, because the label that can be slapped onto a particular fictional work isn't what's important. It's the story that matters, and speculative fiction elements open up new possibilities and new depths.

So it's a pleasure to see that *Aboriginal* continues to stretch the boundaries of SF.

Sincerely,  
David Graham  
Cincinnati, OH

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I object! I object very strongly to the story "Bluebonnets" by Patricia Anthony. "Good Neighbor" and "Eating Memories" were OK, but I must put my foot down and object to "Bluebonnets."

Not because it's a poorly written story without merit. Quite the contrary, it is a sensitive, highly moving story about the loss of a loved one that sooner or later we all must face.

What I object to is the fact that it only remotely has anything to do with science and the concept could hardly be considered fiction.

Scattering the story with a few symbolic robots and an automated check-out machine to stretch it into the realm of SCI-FI reminds me of a complaint often used by critics of early Science Fiction when they referred to the "love interest" as simply "window dressing." Though I think the complaint was not always justified, in this case it certainly is, in my humble opinion.

"Bluebonnets" is without a doubt a very well written story, but a story which belongs in *Woman's Day* or *McCall's* or even *The Saturday Evening Post*. Not in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.

Now "The Soft Heart of the Electron" by R.P. Bird is true SCI-FI. Though it was too downbeat for my taste, I nonetheless enjoyed it immensely. Of all the stories in issue 16, "At Kokomo Joe's" by Brooke Stauffer was my favorite; its SCI-FI elements were light, but nonetheless it was true Science Fiction.

In parting, all I can say is keep up the good work and continue weeding out those stories that do not have a true semblance of Science Fiction to them.

Sincerely,  
Dwight G. Clark  
South Royalton, VT

(With millions of baby boomers only two to three decades away from old age and its accompanying increase in health infirmities, combined with the skyrocketing cost of medical treatment, we fear the decision made by the protagonist in "Bluebonnets" will soon be one facing us all. And examining the future before it happens is very much SF. Er, if you know of any nursing home which currently practices euthanasia, I'd suggest you inform the authorities. The last time we looked, it was still illegal and likely to result in a murder indictment. At some grim point in the future the cost-benefit curve of medicine may change all that. —Ed.)

Sirs—

Hoo boy! Reading Susan Wolf's letter in the July/August 89 issue was like having a dead cat swung in one's face. Perhaps Ms. Wolf felt that presenting her opinions in such a dry, unexpanded style formed a sort of cold haiku of distaste, but in my part of the universe, when we state our opinions, we are happy to present them with at least a smidgen of evidence!

Is the ham-handed tone of the letter in question due to your extensive excision of any supportive facts the correspondent might have added to her little diatribe? (No. —Ed.) If we can take Ms. Wolf's statements at face value, then it's clear that the people in charge at *Aboriginal* are editing fanatics, taking the trouble every month to cut out all those lovely stories from only Susan Wolf's copy, and replacing them with the mysterious, thug-like anti-art she's been getting so unpleasant about. Not to mention throwing all that crude, violent, and curiously nameless art at her alone, while we other *Aboriginal* readers get to enjoy the fiercely original and decidedly nonviolent work of Pat Morrissey, Larry Blamire, Courtney Skinner, David Deitrick, and others.

Maybe I haven't reading *Aboriginal* long enough, missing some shallow, sensationalist period in your existence, but for me, stories like "Goodness," "Looking for Miriam," and particularly last issue's "Bluebonnets" were pretty moving stuff. And I've never seen a piece of art in your magazine that was as crude and violent as the writing style of some Hawaiian armchair critic I could mention.

So, if you would be so kind as to send me a copy of your writer's and artist's guidelines, and if Ms. Wolf will send me a copy of hers, maybe I'll try to win her back for you. On second thought, just send me yours. I write

(and draw) humor, and that's bound to be beneath Ms. Wolf's apparently high and narrow standards.

Frankly, I love *Aboriginal SF*, as I find it a sane, eccentric, and darily non-sensationalist voice in a sometimes stoic field. I would want *Aboriginal* to change in one way only — to that end, please rush me those guidelines! I'll be in touch. Wishing you, your contributors, and your magazine continued health and great longevity, I remain,

Your humble servant,  
J.R. Masset  
Hollywood, CA

Dear *Aboriginal*,

Well, now you've gone and done it. You've made me break THE RULE. As you might guess, the rule states that one shouldn't waste time writing letters to the editor of a magazine expressing how great/good/mediocre/bad that magazine is because someone else has already done it. I have to make an exception to the rule for *Aboriginal*. I've been a subscriber to *Aboriginal* for about six months now and have noticed the beginnings of what I can only describe as *Aboriginal* Addiction. This disease can be characterized by the following symptoms. First, when the magazine arrives there is manic activity in which the afflicted person reads it from cover to cover. This is then followed by a depressed state when the patient realizes that, having read the magazine, the next issue won't arrive for two months. This depressed state can only be partially treated by reading other SF magazines since, alas, these are really only placebos. I hope that the Allen Publisher will realize the horrible effect this is having on Earthlings and, maybe, in the future the Addiction can be treated with monthly issues of *Aboriginal*. (I know, I know, everyone asks that, I keep telling all the SF fans I know to subscribe hoping that the disease may become so rampant that monthly issues become necessary to treat it.)

More seriously, I want to commend you for publishing the story by Kir Bulychev. The story is wonderful at several levels. I read the last few paragraphs over and over again and could not help but be reminded of the last few minutes of *Dr. Strangelove* when, as the world is blowing up, the leaders are arguing about a "mine shaft gap." His story has that same sense of absurd reality. Intellectually, it's easy to understand that, of course, the Soviets are as concerned about nuclear war and environmental destruction as are Americans, but reading Bulychev's story lets you understand this at a gut level. It's the best kind of Science Fiction, it makes you think.

Sincerely,  
Steve Cheatham  
Toledo, OH

(Continued to page 60)

# Doo-Wop

(Continued from page 41)

hotseat. Tenderly he took the crutch away while Timmy adjusted his headphones and the booth techs got a sound level.

He sang a song that Ebony had never heard before. It was all about a man who lost the one chance for love he had in this life, and how he went through the rest of his days alone, cold, with nothing to keep him company but greed, ambition, and selfishness. Timmy played his own accompaniment on the plain wood guitar. When he finished, even the techs were sobbing. They shorted out two panels before they found the tissues.

"Why, Timmy, that was plumb beautiful," Bobby-Joe said.

"Wow," one of the techs agreed. "You don't hear stuff like that on the 'waves these days.'"

"Not likely to," the other said, a cutting edge coming into his voice. "Not with snotrockers like Ebony Tzar controlling what goes on the air."

"Please, sir," Timmy replied. "You are speaking of my father's employer, without whose good graces he would never have been able to purchase this fine instrument for me. I have dedicated *You Left Me Holding Cold Fries at the Drive-Thru Window of Love* to him."

Ebony did not take the tech's remark with Timmy's dignified disdain. "Snotrocker, am I?" He waved a fist at them both. "I know that dorktone! I got him his job, and I didn't even *touch* one of his sisters! I'll —"

The spirit's prostho snaked out to reel Ebony back. "LOX out, man. You can't touch him. You're not real."

"You mean I'm ... dead?" Ebony tapped his chest experimentally. "But I can't be! I still pay taxes!"

"Let's just say that a man who doesn't hear all the voices of The Sound is as good as dead."

The techs came out of the booth to beg Timmy for another song. He segued into something lighter, but in the middle of *Takes An Old-Fashioned Piston to Fill Your Engine-Block, Mama*, the boy collapsed coughing.

"He take a bad hit?" Ebony asked the spirit.

"His whole life's a bad hit, sapienoid." Not even a glimmer of Mylar escaped those tight lips now. "Won't ride the wires, won't take a spin with a DNArachne Lab to get himself fixed up, won't even plug into the Medinets. Says he only wants to see a real doctor."

"Real? Does he mean ... human?"

The spirit's leather strips curled at the edges. "You bought it right. And you know what that means."

Ebony Tzar shook his head in disbelief. "The last colony of human doctors is on the isle of Grenada. Superstatus creds to see one, and if you want one who actually got a degree ... It's more than I'd pay Timmy's old man for a complete blood-switch!"

"You don't exactly strain your system transcribing to Bobby-Joe's account, do you, Tzar?" Cold

eyes weighed Ebony as he cringed under the truth. "Do it cheap for DaiNipCo and fuck the rest." The spirit's gaze shifted to Timmy, who was assuring everyone he was fine. "I see an abandoned banjo by the firepit, and a guitar-pick without an owner, lovingly preserved. If these visions be not altered by the future, I'm gonna get my gang together and come looking for your brainstem, slimebelly."

The spirit and the scene winked out in sync, leaving Ebony standing naked on another snowy street. "Why the fuck can you never get visited by the Spirits of Independence Day Past, Present and Future ..." he grumbled, slapping his flesh back to warmth. He looked up and saw that he was standing under the arched entry to another school. A familiar holo beamed down upon him, the woman's face transformed by an inner fire more radiant than anything tech could provide. Beneath her image was the school's name, bioglued onto the stone with phosphorescent moss, and a testimonial to the music teacher who had preserved the neglected aspects of The Sound through the Technopop dark ages.

"No ..." Ebony trembled. The holo was *too* good. He felt as if he could reach right up and pull his lost love down out of the granite frame. "Laura! Laura!"

A restraining hand heavy with rings fell onto his shoulder as he tried to shinny up the synthivy-covered wall. Ebony Tzar fought down a gut-splitting scream as he beheld the familiar black pompadour, the sensually pouting mouth, the wide-belted gold lame suit with a picture of Graceland picked out in diamonds on the buckle.

But the rest of the face was blank.

Ebony crouched on the icy pavement. "I am — in the presence of The Sound Yet To Come?"

The belt-buckle flashed confirmation. A backup group of four shadowy figures in green satin tubes materialized behind the spirit. Every *Bee-bop-a-loo-bop* they uttered was a stake through Ebony's heart. Intimations of the truly immortal suffused his soul. The dread King held out his hand and Ebony took it. In the next instant, the archway of the Laura Betrudia School was empty.

Men in open-collared pastel sports shirts hurried back and forth through a familiar suite of offices. Their rubber-soled boat shoes made no sound as they passed, though the air whispered through the meshes of their shouldered tennis racquets. A fresh-faced young woman in an angora sweater, plaid skirt, and ballerina flats sat at the transparent desk.

"This is my office!" Ebony broke from his escort and flung himself onto the desktop. "Why are you in my place?" The woman acted as if he weren't there. She continued to dictate puts and calls into the longspeaker at her fingertips. "Who is this *dos equis* dolly? What's she doing here?"

The King did not answer. The backup group shoo-bopped softly as a comparably wholesome looking male came in. "Congratulate me, Bootsy darling," he beamed. "I unloaded the last of those tacky microdiscs onto the Golden Oldies station. The 'waves are clear for our kind of Sound.'"

"I just knew I could count on you, Chip." Bootsy tapped her scrubbed cheek coyly. "Kiss-kiss." He

planted a light peck where indicated, then drew back and frowned.

"Hate to be the bearer of nasties, sweetheart, but we're going to have to dump another one of your bat-chmates."

"Oooh, icky." Bootsy's shoulders trembled. "I just *loathe* the dumpings. It's so much more sick-making when it's your own flesh and blood, too."

"Just because you were all grown from the same cell doesn't mean you owe him anything." Chip's magnificent implant-free jaw was firm. "This has been your company ever since you edged the DaiNip-Co board into group *seppuku*—"

"Euw, eww, eww!" Bootsy pressed her hands to her mouth in ladylike revulsion, but the phantom Ebony caught the hint of a bloodlapping smile behind her fingers.

"— and you can't let sentiment into the office. *Fiat pecunia, ruat familia*."

"I suppose you're right, Chip." Bootsy sighed. "I did try to re-educate them, but we haven't been able to communicate at all since I opted for the sex-change."

Chip raised Bootsy's hand to his lips. "You did what any smart person would do when the only way into Harvard Business Orbital was through the fem-quotas. Shall I bring him in?"

"Let's get it over with."

Ebony Tzar looked frantically from the poshed pair at the desk to the gaunt figure now stumbling across the carpet. "No! It can't be!"

His own face gazed back at him out of fear-madened eyes.

"You mean I've been — *cloned*?"

"Yip-yip-yip-yip-yip-yip." The backup group nodded as one, and horror swelled in Ebony's breast as he realized that they, too, were tearsheets of himself. He stared at Bootsy and saw his features softened to femininity, without even the hint of androgyny to relieve the terror.

"But — but they can't clone you without consent unless you're a — a —"

The King's head slowly moved up and down.

"— business failure."

The Ebony Tzar Yet-To-Come lurched into Chip, gurgling promises of reform, but his batchmate sister coldly said, "It's too late for that. You had the chance to sign the Sweet Salvation Chowder and Marching Society Band for us. Their redesigning of *Takes An Old-Fashioned Piston to Fill Your Engine-Block*, *Mama* just shipped Californium. Instead you dug up some Living History bunch called the Vampire Spikes Back —"

"Vampire Spikers," Chip prompted.

"— and lost us the whole cotillion-music market."

Bootsy pushed a red button on the desk. Ebony watched as a doublewalled clearplas cylinder rose out of the floor around his genetic descendant. A thin tube mutated out of the container's inner wall and pierced a vein in the captive clone's forearm. Blue liquid pumped up between the walls and siphoned through the tube. The clone's sagging white skin plumped up and rosied as a grin of hideous hilarity split his face. The pupils of his eyes staged a friendly takeover of the irises.

"Oh, Chip, not drugs!" Bootsy wailed. "That's so — so *fossily*."

"Be brave, my dear." Chip struck a heroic stance.

"It will be over soon."

And it was, when the carboy of acid lowered from the ceiling and offloaded straight down into the cylinder. Ebony Tzar scarcely had time to take breath for a state-of-the-art shriek before his clone was totally digested. Cylinder and carboy both retracted. Chip leaned over Bootsy's shoulder and brushed cheeks.

"Well, that's the last one. Merry Christmas, darling."

Groaning like a soul in torment, Ebony Tzar collapsed at the feet of the King, fingers futilely grasping for purchase on skintight gold lame. "O spirit of The Sound Yet To Come, tell me that this is not the way my future *must* be! Surely if a man can switch channels on his BonePhone, he can switch channels in his life? And I will! I swear I will! I will open my heart, my mind, and my contracts to new music! I will listen to all the guises of The Sound! I will give Bobby-Joe's boy a fair hearing, a contract, a trip to Grenada, anything! Only please, please tell me that the future may be changed!"

"Dooo-ooo-wahhhhhh!" The King and the backups faded in harmony.

"Oh poo," Bootsy said, her eyes suddenly focusing on the white-bristled man stretched out on her carpet. "Looks like we forgot one of them, Chip." She hit the red button and clearplas shot up around Ebony. He pounded on the walls, dodged the needles darting out at him, shouted at the top of his lungs that there had been some mistake. Bootsy wiggled her fingers at him.

"T.T.F.N.," she said as the ceiling opened and the carboy came down.

Ebony screamed himself bolt upright on the futon. Sunlight washed the apartment. He ran his hands all over his own body, taking his time about it, not stopping until he achieved proof positive of his continued existence. Then he leaped from his bedding with an ecstatic cry.

Within the week, Ebony Tzar was riding the newest Sound on the 'waves. Little Timmy's shocker HickChic single, *Don't Matter If You Love Me, Honey, I'm Still Keeping the Hound Dog*, hit the public so hard that no one noticed when DaiNipCo went under in a tsunami of financial Byzantizing that left Ebony Tzar plucking custom-made 14K hayseeds out of his hair.

There was a minor nuclear exchange as the monetary underpinnings of several Third World nations ashed out in DaiNipCo's wake. When the weather cleared up, those who were still able to do so said that if any man knew how to hear the many tracks of The Sound — and make a shitload of creds at the same time — it was Ebony Tzar.

May that be truly said of us, and all of us. □

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Fleming 89

# Boomerangs

(Continued from page 56)

P.S. Oh yeah, let me place another vote for keeping the name *Aboriginal*. What a great name for an SF magazine!

Dear Mr. Ryan,

By God, you did it! An excellent story combined with fabulous illustrations. Too bad for us (not his fault) the author is Russian. I am still waiting for an American author to write something excellent for *Aboriginal* — HOWEVER, NO MATTER WHERE THE HELL IT CAME FROM, SYNERGY HAS FINALLY BEEN ACHIEVED. I speak, of course, of "The District Domino Championship" by Kir Bulychev, with art by Larry Blamire.

Every time I look at the two illustrations I just laugh. What a pleasure for the eyes and imagination BOTH. The story and the illustrations work together perfectly; the story enhances the art and the art enhances the story. Fusion!!

In the first picture, of Udalov, I know EXACTLY what he is feeling — and I have an inkling it has something to do with visions of domino dominion while world destruction is imminent. Then I read the story, and I know why he is feeling what he is feeling, and I love it. In the second illustration, I have a feast — so many parts of a harmonious visual whole — and I am tickled by these three guys: Udalov, Loshkin on the cot, and Grubin — and I know exactly how they feel as they charge ahead with the only bit of human hope they have left while everything turns to shit around them. And laugh about it! Fabulous. Fabulous.

Maybe only one victory is worth a year of mediocrity. Keep it up!

Sincerely,  
Charles Knouse  
Sandown, NH

Dear Mr. Ryan:

I have read *Aboriginal SF*, of course, and tried to make sense of the opinions expressed therein, but frankly, the lines between science fiction, speculative fiction, surrealism, avant-garde, and what critics are now pleased to call "magical realism" (not to be confused with fantasy) are now so blurred that it takes sharper vision than mine to distinguish them. Honestly, are these distinctions really necessary? Good fiction is good fiction, whether it is written by John Cheever, John Gardner, or John Shirley.

Which leads me to the last issue, No. 16. I really liked Brooke Stauffer's "At Kokomo Joe's." Now, you wanna tell me that's SF? I'd call it surrealism, myself. It has just the right blend of humor, mystery, surprise, and suspense. Let us see more from Brooke. The illustrations were first-rate, too.

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Kir Bulychev's "The District Domino Championships" seemed like an odd cross between Stanislaw Lem and Dostoyevski. I especially liked the barometer that "had dropped so low it had fallen from its pillar." As the wife of a master chess player, I am all too familiar with the single-mindedness of a gamesman, let alone a Russian gamesman.

Finally, kudos for printing Bruce Boston's "Of Archetypes and Arcologies." The imagery was clear, crisp, and vivid, devoid of the obscurantist self-indulgence that flaws so much poetry these days. Any magazine that publishes poetry on a regular basis has my full support, anyway. Poetry says things prose cannot; keep up the good work.

Sincerely,  
Sarah Stegall  
Austin, TX

P.S. Love the crazy alien publisher. Don't change him/her/it.

ASF — Editor —

It's sad that you ship your magazines in plastic wrappers. They are hard to remove and difficult to replace again when you put them away to save. When you try to stack them with other magazines, they slide all around and make a real mess. Don't believe it? Try it. When *Aboriginal* comes, you have to hunt around for a pair of scissors or a SHARP knife to open it — otherwise, a torn cover. It's really a cheapskate way to advertise your magazine — your customer, the subscriber, has to bear the inconvenience. You probably already know all this, but I'm glad I told you just the same.

The magazine itself is OK. Why don't you just put it in a plain envelope? But of course you won't.

William Dolan  
Seminary, MS

Dear *Aboriginal SF*,

I would like to say I enjoy reading your magazine, but I find one serious fault with it, which involves its packaging.

The world is finally beginning to realize the consequences of its wasteful, careless, environmentally dangerous deeds. Our landfills are being deluged by the results of our plastic society. The most reasonable action is to cut down on our use of plastic.

Therefore, it is rather disturbing to see your fine magazine delivered in a plastic wrapper. I know of several magazines which avoid damage in the post by using paper wrappers. They prevent damage as well as, are better for the environment than, and work for storage as well as plastic wrappers.

If paper costs more than plastic, then I would willingly pay a higher subscription price because I genuinely admire your magazine. Remember — every little bit helps.

Sincerely,  
Vicki Nelson  
Pendleton, OR

(We wrap the magazine to protect it from postal machinery and rough handling and the weather. Nothing else does it quite as well, but we're looking. And it costs more, not less, to use plastic. — Ed.)

Dear Charlie,

I'm very pleased to be co-winner of the Boomerang Award for poetry. Thanks to all those who voted for "Against the Ebon Rush of Night," and also to you and the staff at *Aboriginal* for including poetry in your format and as part of the awards.

I've been a subscriber since your first issue. It's been great to see the magazine grow slicker and better, to read the newer writers you are discovering and encouraging, and to watch as you debunk the myth that a few "established" magazines have a lock on the sf-fantasy field. Wishing you many more years of increasing success.

Best,  
Bruce Boston  
Albany, CA



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# Editor's Notes

(Continued from page 16)

like to play God, but don't have the skills.

They invented the concept of blasphemy to help bolster their own positions — just as any bureaucrat invents regulations to "interpret" the laws passed by a legislature. The concept of blasphemy allows these religious leaders to say, "Agree with me, or else ...." And they do need hit men.

Mind you, there are many fine and wholesome religious people who would no more think of stoning someone who disagrees with them than they could conceive of becoming a TV evangelist. Such things are anathema to anyone who really reads the literature, because if anything is clear in all Scripture, it's that God doesn't have much patience with "whited sepulchres" and those who would lead others astray.

Of course, even if we were to play this mind game, much of the above is highly presumptuous and clearly open to debate. For instance, would it even be possible to understand this God, or would a variation of Clarke's Law apply? (Arthur C. Clarke has said that a technology which was highly advanced would appear as magic to a member of a less advanced culture — e.g., what would a Neanderthal think of a helicopter or hologram?)

Then there are the paradoxes — such as the popular question: Can God make a rock so heavy even He can't lift it?

In science fiction, of course, the answer would be yes, as God could make such a rock in one alternate universe while leaving it impossible in another, sort of having it both ways at once.

As for blasphemy and the theological plausibility of this entire argument? They are both probably just as real as that ultra-heavy rock. □

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# To Dust

By Lois Tilton

Art by Lori Deitrick

Claudine Iversen sat in the silence of the breakfast table between her husband and son. The empty chair, the non-presence of Joanna, sat with them, troubling and oppressive.

Greg shoved his chair back, mumbled a "Bye," and went out the back door. Claudine bit her lower lip, let him go without protest. He was taller than she was now, blond and long-armed — a basketball player. Joanna had been darker, like Paul.

The counselors had told them to let Greg work out his sister's death in his own way. The whole thing had been hard on him, especially the way people talked, the way they would look at him and think, it's genetic, isn't it? Hereditary.

Could she blame him if he were glad it was finally all over?

Claudine looked across the table at Paul. There were dark, exhausted pouches under his eyes. She started to say something, then caught herself. The same questions that she would lie awake with every night — Why didn't we see that something was wrong? Why did we wait until it was too late? — Paul kept locked away inside himself to feed his guilt.

He finished his coffee, leaned across the table to give her a brief, emotionless kiss, and left for work. The emptiness of the house enveloped Claudine in silence. It was summer, and she had no classes. If Joanna had been home...

Claudine walked down the hall and stopped in front of Joanna's room. In the week since the funeral she had passed this door half a hundred times and every time had turned away. Now she turned the knob and paused in the quiet of the open doorway. Sunlight through the windows glinted off dust motes, floating serene and almost motionless in the warm golden air.

She felt an insane temptation to embrace false hopes, to tell herself Joanna wasn't really gone. Perhaps it was contagious.

No. Joanna's illness had been biochemical, caused by a genetic flaw that had been virtually eliminated a generation before she was even born. But not completely, Claudine thought bitterly. A few individuals were immune to the transduction viruses. A few imperfect individuals like Joanna.

Claudine looked slowly around the room. Joanna seemed present in everything: her pictures, her books, the light projector Paul had given her. A flash of refracted sunlight caught Claudine's eye. There on

the desk was a pendant on a broken gold chain. As she held it up, the jewel-tone butterfly wings caught the light from the windows. It had been around Joanna's neck when they found her. Claudine remembered how she had torn the butterfly away, breaking the gold links of the chain. How had it gotten here?

Holding the pendant, she faced the light projector in one corner, brushed a finger over the smooth chrome surface, leaving a line through the thin film of dust. Joanna's note had said: You could never see the light.

There was a chip still in the drive. That last night, she had turned away, refused to look. Now, all she would have to do was press PLAY.

"Mommy, look at my picture!"

Joanna had seemed at first like any normal little girl. Drawing was what she liked best. Flowers and butterflies, pretty things. Later, unicorns and fairies with iridescent wings. Paul would always have at least one of her pictures on the wall of his office.

Claudine spent hours reading to her. Joanna liked fairy tales the best. Perhaps, the counselor said once, she was too involved in fantasies. It was normal in a child her age, of course, but possibly a different selection of books would be better. On the other hand, if they wanted to be sure, there were always tests.

Nonsense, Paul had insisted defensively. Joanna was artistic, more sensitive than the average child. That was all.

Claudine had agreed. She didn't like to have Paul upset. When Joanna got older, she would learn to distinguish fantasy from reality.

"I can't sleep, Mom. I'm scared. Suppose I don't ever wake up?"

Claudine could still see in her mind that scene from the movie *Say Your Prayers*, *Mary Ellen*: the little girl kneeling at the side of her bed in her braids and long white nightgown, the demented grandmother standing behind her — If I should die before I wake...

Just like Joanna, so very disturbingly just like Joanna. But Claudine would never have allowed her to see that kind of movie. Where had she gotten such ideas, then?

Her drawings were not always pretty in those days, either. There were darker pictures, Brueghel-like images of death. "What do you want to do stuff like this for?" Paul had demanded impatiently, crumpling a drawing.



There had been times when Claudine could hear her up alone in her room, talking to herself. "Don't you think —" she started to ask Paul, more than once, but he refused to listen. Refused to acknowledge any suspicion that his daughter might be defective. No one was defective anymore. That kind of thing had been cured.

"I'm not going, not if I have to take my crazy sister along!"

Claudine had slapped Greg across the mouth the day he made that remark. The guilt still burned, a year later. Greg had recognized the truth before his parents did. And the other kids — they could all see that something was wrong. Paul would give her money for new clothes, festival tickets, and tell her to invite some of her friends, but she didn't seem to have many friends anymore. She would rather spend the time alone in her room, she insisted. She was doing light images by that time. Paul had bought her the projector. He even had a few of her holo images in his office.

The school became concerned. They suggested testing. Joanna was too solitary, they said. And when she did participate in some activity, her enthusiasm was often, well, excessive. But by that time, denial had become a reflex.

Claudine opened her hand and looked at the butterfly again. Now she realized who must have found the pendant and put it back on his sister's desk. At least she had gained one thing by coming in here today.

"We're sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Iversen, but Joanna has been missing since last night."

It had been Paul's decision to send her to the art academy, "where they could understand an artistic temperament." Joanna had gotten a full scholarship. Her work, they said, although disturbing, demonstrated a real talent.

Three months later she ran away.

Detectives finally found her living in an old deserted farmhouse with a dozen religious cultists. Claudine's heart sank the day they brought her home and she saw the look on her face, the fervid exultation. Whatever Joanna had been looking for all these years, she had found it at last. And the butterfly pendant was around her neck.

Paul, of course, was livid with rage and embarrassment. "There ought to be a law. Get those people off the streets so they can't corrupt people's kids."

But the First Amendment still protected religion, the lawyers told him. The cultists might be crazy, but they had the right to pursue their delusions as long as they were not a danger to themselves or others.

And besides, the cultists were not responsible for Joanna's problem, no more than the fairy stories had been, years ago. Claudine knew that now.

"Remember, it could have been something worse, like cancer."

Tests were conclusive. Joanna had a rare immunity to the usual viruses designed to target defec-

tive segments of DNA and replace them with normal genetic material. The viral transduction vectors were supposed to have eliminated all somatogenic disease, but there were occasional exceptions, the doctors told them. People were not always perfect, after all.

Cancer had been the first big breakthrough, over fifty years ago, and soon afterwards it had been the turn of the mental defects: senility, schizophrenia, depression. Before long, those afflictions too had disappeared. And along with them, untargeted, another, more subtle and far more widespread.

People were slow to notice the connection when membership in churches started declining. It was the fanatics who were missed at first, the ranters, the screamers, the holy warriors. The ones who beat their kids to death to drive the devil out of them.

Quietly, gradually, the entire syndrome had withered away. Today, as with most other forms of insanity, you could only find religion in a history book or a horror movie.

Or so Claudine had thought, once.

But at least there was treatment. Joanna could still be cured. It was not too late.

"I don't want it! I won't let you do this to me!"

Paul had refused to discuss the question. It was settled. Joanna was sixteen years old, a minor. First Amendment restrictions didn't apply in such a case, fortunately.

He had barely said a word to her since they brought her home. Claudine knew how much of it was guilt, realizing now how he had refused for so many years to admit the truth. But did he know how much the silence hurt Joanna? Had he seen the look in her eyes when she saw in his office that there were no pictures on the walls, no light images?

"Your father loves you. This is just hard for him to accept," Claudine had tried to explain.

"Loves me! He won't even look at me!"

Claudine bit her lip. It was true. He had loved a daughter whom he had created in his own mind. Here was the real Joanna, sitting on her bed, crying.

"He just wants to turn me into something I'm not, even if it means destroying my soul."

Claudine winced at Joanna's words. Soul. She had picked that up from the cultists.

"We just want you to be well," Claudine insisted. It was the night before the treatment was scheduled. Joanna was sitting on the bed with her knees drawn up, arms hugging them tightly, like a child afraid of the dark. Her face lifted. It was tear-streaked. Her eyes were red. "Please, Mom. I'll go back to school, I'll do what you want, anything! Just don't let them do it!"

Claudine shook her head, miserably. But Joanna crawled across the bed, held onto her. "Don't you see? I've finally found myself! After all these years, I know! Now they want to take it all away. It's me they want to destroy!"

You couldn't reason with her. Claudine did not have the heart to try. But a moment of doubt must have shown in her face. Joanna jumped down from the bed, ran over to the light projector. "Look!" she cried, "I can show you! The soul never dies, it —"

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LORI DALTRUCK... 89



Claudine turned her face away and started to back out of the room. She didn't want to listen to any more of this. After tomorrow, it would all be over.

Joanna screamed after her, "I won't let them do it! You'll see!"

They found her the next morning. The note read: "This is the only way to save myself. You don't even know what you've lost. You could never see the light."

If she had only known. The uncertainty that tormented Claudine's nights: If she had realized Joanna would kill herself rather than submit to the treatment. If there had been a choice between Joanna dead and Joanna as she had always been, as she wanted to be. Admit it, had she ever been happier than when she was with the cultists? Was it so very important that she be perfect, instead?

And Paul? What would he have chosen?

Claudine had told herself, over and over, that they had done the right thing. Joanna could have been happy once she was well, free from delusions.

Too late, now. Claudine turned to confront the projector, the message Joanna had tried to show her that last night. If she had only listened, tried to understand. *You never saw the light.*

She pressed PLAY.

The center of the room seemed to fill with fog. Slowly, a shape emerged from the darkness — small, drab, haloed with a corona of light. The shape began to move, feebly at first, as if something within it were trying to break free. A split appeared, lengthened as the struggles intensified. A form began to emerge.

Its wings were dull and crumpled when it first stood free. But then they caught the light. It was a transfiguration. The jewel-tone wings spread wide. They fluttered, tentatively at first, and then bore the creature into flight, leaving the cast-off husk behind. As it rose, the light brightened ...

Claudine abruptly hit the STOP switch. The radiant butterfly vanished. The fading after-image was blurred by tears.

She looked around the room where she had read so many fairy stories to the six-year-old Joanna. Had she ever remembered the will-o'-the-wisp who leads the child farther and farther into the dark forest, until she is utterly lost, in a place whence she can never, ever return? In pursuit of a phantasm that she alone can see?

That last night, Joanna was already lost in unreality, so deep she could not turn back, her sight fixed only on the illusion. It had been too late, so many years too late. Now all that was left was the emptiness, the silence. The loss.

Claudine felt a sharp pain in her hand. Slowly she opened her fist, saw the pendant. The broken edge of one wing had cut the palm.

As hard as she could, she threw the false, hateful thing across the room.

The door closed behind her. In the room's stillness nothing moved but the motes of dust, slowly falling through the sunlight. □

# Were-being Split Personality Jazz

By James S. Dorr

I'm a were-kraken, a tentacled monster, under the light of the golden moon, and when that sphere rises, I gain my employment by playing piano at Kelley's Saloon — that's the first moon.

The second moon casts a silver-toned light on my planet of birth, and it may be the gravity, maybe the water, but it's not the same as the white-rayed orb that waxes to full on my ancestors' Earth.

This new moon, instead, makes my heads grow in number until I'm a hydra with seventeen snoots, and I then play the woodwinds — four clarinets plus a saxophone and a full dozen flutes — in the light of the second.

The third satellite of the planet on which I was blessed to be born casts a brazen hue that elongates my tail, adds scales to my backside, until, dragon formed, my breath catches fire as I play the cornet or, depending on mood, a sizzling French horn.

With three moons in the sky I really start lickin', but then there's a fourth, with a watery face (it's called a "leviathan moon"), and I gain tons whenever it rises.

That's when I play bass, in the shape of a whale, but the fifth moon's the best when its zinc-tinted rays shine and cause me to come into were-griffinhood, with claws and wings that I beat and I stamp and I clash like cymbals, and pound the air with as I riff on the drums, and I buzz-roll and paradiddle and flam, a multi-talented, one-critter band ...

... Until the sixth, leaden moon, rises, full, and makes me turn back into being a man.

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